I Summon the All-Seeing Eye

by all_possible_worlds

Summary

Star never stopped using Eclipsa's spell to spy on Marco and Jackie's dates. What happens when she catches a show she never expected to see? A cascade of shameful secrets that never shall be told.

A love story at its most unconventional. Part erotica and part high-fantasy. A retelling of the later half of Season 2, where nothing is quite the same as it once was, and all goes so very wrong and yet so very right for our heroes. A tale of adventure, of relationships of more than one sort, of magic and its consequences, and, of course, of sex. Lots and lots of sex.

"I am hope, triumphant. I am will, unbending. I am love, all-conquering!"

Note Dec 30 2018: Edited Parts I-III, including brand new chapter (#22). Part IV has now begun, with Chapter 32.

Notes

This begins as pure undiluted 200 proof. smut, but for better or worse, plot is in the horizon. As well as even more smut, of course. Expect 100% smut for the first chapter, then
something like 50-75% smut for the rest of Part I, and a smut-tastic scene every three chapters or so for Part II and thereafter.

This fanfic is simultaneously published in AO3 on a rough bi-weekly schedule. It should be caught up with any other versions of the same fic elsewhere in the Internet.

**Extraordinarily obvious disclaimer:** I do not own Star Vs. the Forces of Evil or its characters. They belong to Disney, Disney XD, and Daron Nefcy. I made no money from writing this story.

**Somewhat obvious warning:** This story represents fictional characters who are canonically 14 (and who must remain canonically 14 to fit the continuity of the referenced episodes) having sexual experiences very much unlike those that 14 year olds normally have or are in any way advised to have. Half of it is based on the experiences of people almost twice as old as the characters, the other half is outright impossible fantasy (and not always just the bits involving actual magic). If you are 14 years old, or otherwise a minor yourself, you frankly shouldn't be reading this. If, despite this site's and my best efforts, you are, please know that almost nothing that happens here (or elsewhere in Internet porn, in general) is a good point of comparison for a healthy teen romantic or sexual life. Stop reading now and get ya self to Scarleteen!

Now... with that PSA out of the way, let's get to a dozen or more chapters about what goes in and out of Star Butterfly’s pussy! Plus, like, battles and demons and stuff.
Part I: A Story Retold

Chapter 1: Star, Gazing

Continuity stardate: This chapter takes place between “Running With Scissors” (S02E16b) and “Just Friends” (S02E20b) - and it was first written before “Just Friends” aired.

“So... bored!” cried Star. She looked up at her feet, propped vertically against the side of her bed, while the rest of her small frame lay sprawled on the bedroom floor. Both her hands gripped the wand, pushing it forwards and backwards, as if she were lazily taking aim to blast the high ceiling, adding yet another hole to the roof of her host family’s house.

Suddenly, she let both arms fall to her sides with an exasperated sigh. “Where are you Marco Diaz?!” she grumbled aloud.

She had been waiting for her best friend to come back from his big important date with Jackie. No, of course she didn’t care that Marco was out with Jackie, jeez! He was her friend, she was happy for him. But she was also alone, and bored, and had planned to drag him to a cloudceratops race or something equally exciting as soon as he got back.

But he was instead at the stupid boring movies, with stupid awesome Jackie, while she was in her stupid boring room, waiting for him to get back. She had thought of calling Pony Head, or Janna. Hell, she had considered calling Tom! Tom!! But she didn’t want to hang out with Tom, or Pony Head, or Janna, or any of her other friends in Echo Creek or Mewni. She wanted to hang out with Marco!

As a matter of fact, she wanted to hang out with Marco a whole lot these days. She especially wanted to hang out with Marco on those exact same occasions he decided to go on dates with Jackie. What do you mean suspicious?! Nah, it wasn’t like that. Was it? It was just that, well, Jackie was cool and all, but it was always going to the movies, or skateboarding, or going for a dance. Why did Marco want to go on dates with Jackie so much, when Star could actually take him somewhere really fun? They literally could go anywhere in any dimension. He might have the scissors now, but she knew where things were at.

Maybe Marco was bored now too, or maybe Jackie was bored, or maybe they had gotten into a fight and they were both miserable. Or maybe they got attacked by monsters! Oh, no!

Well, if they had been attacked by monsters, Star reasoned, then she needed to know. Didn’t she? It was for the good of her friends! For their own protection!

And it’s not like Marco would ever find out...

She jumped onto the bed, flipping herself around so that she was now sitting on the bed all boring-like. But that was needed for what she had to do now, she had to be able to focus, just for a little while. She pointed her wand forward. After all, this was for Marco’s own good. They had been
gone for four hours. The movie should have lasted only two at most. Surely, there was evil afoot!

“I summon the All-Seeing Eye, to tear a hole into the sky...”

She could hardly believe she was doing it again. It was wrong. Dark magic under the best of circumstances, and even worse under these circumstances. He was her friend, more than that, her bestie! If he ever found out... no, what was she thinking? She was simply protecting her friend. From monsters! Looking out for him, you know? Like friends do...

“...reveal to me that which is hidden...”

Plus, it was either this or calling again, and at least this way didn’t leave fifty plus notifications on his phone. So no chance of Marco learning what she was doing, which was important, because, after all... He just shouldn’t know, alright? Even if this was all for his own good, even if she was doing absolutely nothing wrong.

“...unveil to me what is forbidden!”

Dark clouds burst out of her wand and swirled wildly around the middle of her room. A tumbling mass of black smoke and purple light coalesced ahead of her, abruptly cut in half by a slit of blinding yellow brightness, looking quite a bit like the pupil of an inhuman eye opening wide before her. The mewman princess had to admit, as far as the her spells went, that one was certainly the creepiest! But, whatever, it wasn’t really that much worse than a rain of flaming kittens when you actually thought about it.

Star’s heart was beating like crazy. Of course, Star’s heart was always beating like crazy. But this wasn’t excited-beating, it was more like anxious-beating. Well, worst case it was Jackie and Marco having a great time, and best case it was monsters! Wait, no, she meant the other one, the other way around! Right? If they were having fun, then she ought to be happy for her friend. Besides, it’s not like she ever thought of Marco that way when they first met, and yet...

The view in the portal became clear, interrupting her thoughts. At first Star could only see Marco’s face and torso, he was wearing his usual red hoodie, but the hood was pulled backwards. His cheeks flustered bright red and a few drops of sweat shining on his brow.

“Oh Marco, Marco, Marco. Good old Marco, always sooo nervous over nothing at all,” thought Star, her frown turning briefly into an amused smile. “You two have been going out for over a month, you can’t spend aaaall your life getting nervous around Jackie!” she chuckled.

If anything, he seemed more nervous than he had back when she had scryed on them during their first date. She had been bored at the cemetery and, and... well, she didn’t want to relive that night! The Marco thing was confusing enough on its own, the last thing she needed right now was beating herself over losing Glossaryck.

Wait, why was Marco still staring ahead with that flustered expression? Why was his mouth hanging open like that? He usually couldn’t stop talking when he was nervous, but this was the first time Star saw him freeze like that. Maybe there was something wrong with her spell? Was she doing this to him, like when she had caused them to fall from Jackie’s skateboard? Or, maybe she had been right all along and they were in trouble!

“Well, Marco, what do you think?” came Jackie’s voice from somewhere outside of the viewing window created by the vortex of Star’s spell. Marco seemed to only stutter in response, “eh... uh... well... wow! Those are... I mean... you are... I mean...”
Then it dawned on Star that the wall behind Marco didn’t seem like any part of the movie theater at all. Nor did it look like they were outside. The wall was too close, and there was a shelf there, and two skateboarding posters. Nah. It couldn’t be. Right? Could it? Star focused on her spell, tried to zoom out or move it to the side or somehow find Jackie in the picture. When she did, her mouth went just as wide as Marco’s.

“Heh, dude, relax,” said the platinum blonde girl. Her eyebrow raised in a quizzical look. In her hand, hanging to the side, was a white and green cotton t-shirt. She let it fall to the floor. “If you keep staring like that, you are going to make me nervous too,” she admonished him with a shrug.

Despite her words, the girl’s body language spoke of a confidence that Star could only admire. It was not the only thing the princess of Mewni had to admire either. Through the black clouds, she could now see Jackie’s exposed upper body, covered only by a matching green bra.

Jackie was hot. Flat stomach and a lean toned body product of a very active lifestyle. Her chest was astoundingly well developed for a fourteen year old. She completed the picture with her expertly tossed around hair and big smart green eyes. Yet, what really made it work was the way she stood there, straight yet relaxed, looking at Marco with a face that said ‘yeah, you bet it is your lucky day’. Few girls Jackie’s age were this sexy. Even fewer knew it.

Star’s heart-shaped cheeks went bright glowing red. She shouldn’t be seeing this. They shouldn’t be doing this today. They had said they were just going to the movies. She shouldn’t be seeing this. She shouldn’t be annoyed that his friend was having a good time. She shouldn’t be seeing this. She shouldn’t be comparing her body to Jackie’s. She shouldn’t find the view arousing. She shouldn’t be seeing this!

“So, Marco, are you at least taking that hoodie off?” Jackie asked with a chuckle.

Star was totally going to keep seeing this!

“Yes, I...” Marco fumbled with the red hoodie. He got a hand out and then back in, then tried to pull it while holding on to one of the arms. Jackie laughed again, until Marco, face completely red, managed to fully take the hoodie off and throw it almost violently to the floor. “Done. See! Hoodie gone. Yeah! Told you, no problem.”

Jackie only smiled as she slowly walked towards him. Her eyes looking right into Marco’s. His own glance remained focused significantly lower than hers until the skateboarder girl was right in front of his face. “Okay, Marco. But I think you still have at least some catching up to do here,” she said playfully as she slid her hands under the boy’s grey t-shirt and planted a kiss on his lips.

Star felt very strange watching this. There was the pang of jealousy she didn’t want to admit to herself, and the pang of guilt for spying on her friends like that. “It’s not spying!” her own mind corrected her, unconvincingly. But there was also an overriding curiosity to see where this would lead. A curiosity that only increased as Jackie pulled back from the kiss and began lifting Marco’s shirt.

Star had seen older Marco’s bare chest during that brief interdimensional jaunt with Hekapoo. What she saw now shouldn’t have possibly compared to those incredible chiseled abs and hot action hero body. However, Marco was still in pretty good shape despite her poking fun at him. In fact, due to years of karate and months of monster fighting, he was in rather great shape! Besides, Star thought, there was something different about this time; this was somehow, in a hard to define way, more real than future Marco had been. The context was a lot hotter too, even if it was Jackie and not herself who was actually directly involved.
“Oh,” Star heard Jackie mutter appreciatively as she finished relieving Marco of his t-shirt, and for a moment it was the cool girl that had her mouth open. She composed it into a smile almost immediately. “Well, I am very glad I invited you up.”

Star realized then that Jackie likely had never seen Marco shirtless before. Well, not recently, at least. She had to remember they were friends since they were children, which, by the way, annoyed Star, for some strange reason. But, well, the thing was, she herself saw Marco shirtless all the time. They shared a bathroom after all, and they often got ready together. She had seen him with only a towel like a million times! So had Janna... for some reason. But this might be a first for Jackie. “Enjoy the view, girl...” she whispered to the empty room, and she truly honestly hoped Jackie did.

“Eh...” Marco seemed a lot more self-conscious than his date about being exposed like this, even if it was only his upper body. “Do you, do you do this often? Invite boys up, I mean?” A split second later, he realized with horror what he had just implied. Star knew him well enough to know his mouth had just been running in automatic, but she wondered if Jackie would understand that, and give the boy a chance to retract the metaphorical foot he had just inserted in said mouth by accident. “I mean... I didn’t meant...”

Jackie chuckled. “No. First time ever, actually. You?” she asked with an eye twinkle that made it pretty clear she knew the answer.

“No! I mean, yes! I mean no! I mean, first time too. With girls, I mean. Not with boys. I mean, not that I have done it with boys either...” Marco stammered, and Jackie laughed. She pressed her body against Marco’s naked torso and leaned in for another kiss. This one much longer and much more passionate than the first. The roundness of her breasts compressed ever so slightly against his slim but toned body. Her hands cupped the seat of his jeans, while Marco’s awkwardly found their way to the small of her back.

What Star was feeling now was so much more complicated than jealousy. She felt flustered bright red, and her face was literally glowing. Not figuratively glowing, mind you. Shut-down-the-lights-and-use-it-as-a-lamp glowing. She felt the palms of her hands holding the wand begin to get sweaty. She felt curiosity and excitement overpower her poorly suppressed envy as her eyes were glued to the scene unfolding before her. She felt this was so wrong, in the best possible way.

“Oh. Bad girl,” she joked aloud, and even she wasn’t sure if she meant Jackie or herself.

Marco’s hands climbed up Jackie’s back, until they reached the clasp of her bra, and after feeling around for just a few moments, they undid it. The girl backed away from the kiss then in surprise, the bra still hanging there, covering her nipples and most of her breasts but flowing down perilously low over them. “Wow, Marco. I certainly wasn’t expecting that!” she blurted, with genuine surprise in her expression. “I thought guys usually had trouble with that bit,” she chided, seeming both amused and impressed.

Marco was smiling at her. “Well, it is a long story. You wouldn’t want to know, believe me,” he said, as he self-consciously ran his left hand through his own hair.

“No way! Now you have to tell me,” Jackie retorted. Her eyes seemed to smile even more than her mouth. “Come on, Marco. Tell me!” Her voice lingered on the last word for added emphasis.

“Well... it’s just, this is going to sound really weird...” he began, nervously shifting his posture. “I... practiced.“

“You practiced?” she said, sounding confused. Then, after a few moments, “but I thought this was your first time? I mean... not that it is bad if it isn’t, dude. I have at least kissed boys before. It is
just you just said...

Jackie seemed a bit awkward herself now. Star noted. There was something in her, something petty and childish that drew some measure of satisfaction about the fact the cool girl was not always so damn cool.

“It is. It definitely is, I promise,” Marco rushed to reply. “I didn’t practice with a girl having them on or anything like that. I kinda. Well... I kinda practiced on Star’s bras, from her drawer, put around a chair.”

Jackie’s face seemed only mildly shocked. Star’s eyes went wide like saucers. She took a hand off her wand and subconsciously reached to the back of her own bra, feeling the clasp. Had Marco been unhooking it? It was, sooo weird. But at the same time, she didn’t mind. No, she realized, she didn’t mind at all. Besides, she did weirder things than that. Not underwear related, but surely weirder. She could have helped him with that if he had asked... as a friend, of course.

“It wasn’t a perverted thing, I swear! I wanted to know how to do it. Precisely so I wouldn’t fumble like all the guys in the movies or the stories, and ruin things, so I practiced. But now I realize you must think I am a gigantic creep, and I messed everything up again!” ranted Marco, panic rising in his voice, making him speak faster and faster.

Finally, Jackie’s roaring laugher interrupted him. “Chill, Marco, relax. Yes, it is a bit weird, but not any weirder than the cat pictures, or the truth-or-dare box, or well... the neck guy.” They both shuddered and she grinned at him. “Besides, it was pretty hot before the explanation. You were right, I shouldn’t have asked,” she made a shrugging movement and slid the bra through one arm and then the other, pulled it in one hand, extended her arm outwards and, with a self-assured move, let it fall to the floor. “Well, show me, what else have you practiced?”

Star curled inwardly a little bit. Her joy at learning about Marco’s use of her underwear suddenly deflated as she observed the sight before her. It wasn’t just that Jackie’s assets made her feel insecure by comparison, which they did, and that did not help. They were not only quite the handful for a girl Jackie’s age, but super round and super perky, with perfect pink nubs on top… But also, Star couldn’t help but notice the way Marco was looking at his date now. Part deer in the headlights, part ravenous wolf.

He was completely out of words and completely out of his normal range of expression. His eyes fixated on the girl’s breasts, his mouth opening and closing on its own, a bulge in his pants visible even through the magical portal. He looked entranced, ensorcelled. Star thought to herself that this was a spell Jackie could cast and she couldn’t. She wished there was anything that would make Marco look at her like that. Without her noticing, the wand began glowing bright green.

“No, no, no, you don’t!” she shouted and the green glow dissipated as she fought to regain self-control.

Star wasn’t about to let her wand blast her two best friends, ruin their date and, perhaps worst of all, stop the show! As jealous as she was of Jackie, what Star Butterfly wanted more than anything in the world right now was to see her “bestie” in action.

Some part of Star briefly realized something quite interesting in the moments that followed: When it came to dating Jackie, nine times out of ten, Marco was a wreck of insecurities, babbling and fumbling around. However, there were those rare moments when something else seemed to take over him. A cool elegance, a way to move like he was a dancer confidently entering the dance floor. She had seen him do it when he had received Jackie at their home for their first date, and she was seeing it now.
He gently guided Jackie into her own bed, his arm holding her back as he slowly lowered her down and placed himself on top of her. It was there in way he smiled at her before going in for a long passionate kiss as he gently placed Jackie’s head directly on her pillow. It really felt like he was leading her into a strange form of slow dance, and for a second it seemed to the Mewni princess like she could hear faint Waltz music in the background. Then, whatever part of Star was processing the realization immediately forgot it, as the rest of her took in the view.

“Oh, Marco... you are doing... a-mazing!” Star grinned with barely restrained joy, as her best friend started trailing kisses down Jackie’s neck.

She was glad for her friend, she really really was. Also, admittedly, she was getting quite into watching him do his thing. The princess’ cheeks where literally glowing scarlet now. Where again, literally meant literally. Yes, quite into it, concluded Star to herself.

Jackie only let out a soft gasp, but her hands seemed to grasp the bedsheets far more strongly than required. Now Star wondered what it would be like to be in Jackie’s place, with the boy’s lips pressing and sucking against her own neck. Her hands let go of the wand and she too grasped the edge of the bed.

In that moment, the portal should have vanished. Her wand should have fallen to the floor. Neither happened. Instead the wand remained floating in mid air, projecting the view before her, and Star didn’t care one bit to investigate the why. She was not one to question her own magic much when it was working to her advantage, and especially not right now.

“Ah Marco. I am really really glad I asked you out,” said Jackie. As the boy lifted his head from her neck, the blond girl took his left hand on her own and calmly placed it against her right breast.

“Oh...” Marco seemed to snap back from whatever trance he was in, and Star once again recognized the nervous boy she shared a home with. Which was just as good, since otherwise she wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep any composure while watching such an arousing scene. “I, oh... thanks. I am glad too.”

“You know? It’s better if you play with them. Like this,” Jackie took Marco’s hand again, stretched out two of his fingers and slowly guided them so that they were describing a circular motion over her nipple.

Marco was flustered beyond belief, and as adorable in his own nervous Marco way as he had been hot in his take-charge dancer trance. Jackie kept eye contact with the boy while letting out a very soft satisfied gasp. Damn, Star thought, this girl really was cool. She could understand why Marco liked her. She also really needed to remember that move for, well, reasons.

“Eh, Jackie. How far are we planning on taking this?” Marco asked.

Star observed that his hand kept circling right where Jackie had left it, even as Jackie’s own hands both came to rest behind the girl’s head. Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much, Star thought.

“Depends, dude. How far you want to take it?” the girl replied, as she lay in bed in what would pass for a perfectly relaxed manner if not for the hardened peaks on her chest.

“Ok, enough. No one has any right to be this cool as a teenager on her first time, in any dimension!” thought Star. At the same time, she was also looking at Marco for a response. She wasn’t really sure what she wanted his response to be. Did she want this to end here and now, or to have it continue to its last consequences? Even if that meant her bestie was going to lose his first to
someone other than herself? It was barely a whisper when Marco said it, and even softer as Star spoke, exactly at the same time. “All the way?”

Jackie’s mouth opened briefly into a small circle shape of surprise as she looked at Marco. Then he started backpedaling, “I... I mean, if you want. Only if you want... sorry... shouldn’t have...”

Jackie’s arms pushed him back to the bed and her face rose up to shut up Marco with a deep passionate kiss. Then, with a move that Star almost missed, the skateboarder girl managed to roll both of them around, so that Marco was lying on the bed and she was the one sitting on top of him.

“I want to, Marco. All the way sounds great. But let’s take our time to get there, ok? I mean, we have all night.” She didn’t so much wink as, well, twinkle her eyes at him. Marco’s face went red and he quietly nodded.

Jackie had started kissing and caressing down Marco’s chest. She worked slowly, pausing often to look at him. His face, Star intently noted, alternated between surprise and bliss, and Jackie hadn’t even done much yet. Star wondered, with a pang in her chest that felt partly like drinking something too cold too fast, if Marco would react that way to Star doing something like that, or if he did only because it was Jackie Lynn Thomas.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Marco gasped abruptly. Star took a moment to notice Jackie’s right hand, grasping something in the middle of the boy pants. Star noted with surprised glee how the cylindrical shape extended on the fabric well beyond the area around which Jackie’s hand was closing. It looked pretty big. The girl moved her hand up and down the length of it a few times through the fabric and then let it go. Star’s face frowned briefly in disappointment as Jackie seemed to go back to kissing Marco’s chest. Then, with a swift movement, she unbuttoned Marco’s pants and pulled them down, as well as the boxers beneath. It was Star’s turn to gasp. Her eyes went wide once more.

“Marco, Marco, Marco... where were you hiding that?” Star noted with astonishment, after composing herself a bit.

Well, truthfully speaking, she didn’t have many points of comparison. She and Pony Head had seen pictures, and Marco wasn’t as big as the pictures, but he was still a teenager, and the pictures seemed, well, overly-optimistic. It just seemed bigger than Star expected it to be. When she had thought about it. Once. Or twice. Well, a few times, but just out of curiosity. Well, plenty of times but curiosity was sort of her thing.

“I do not often fantasize about Marco’s penis!” Star shouted to the empty room, unconvincingly.

Jackie was handling it with a lot more composure. Literally and figuratively. Her hand was directly around it now and moving very slowly. She was halfway back to a sitting position, as she used her free hand to finish helping the boy beneath her out of his pants and underwear. She was looking at him and, when their eyes met, she gave the flustered boy a broad smile.

“Have I mentioned yet that I am really glad I asked you out?” she tossed out casually.

“I... eh. You have...” he replied. He held his arms stiff at his sides, and looked very uncertain of what to do next. Jackie chuckled. Star would have too, if she had been looking at her friend’s arms at all, instead of, well, elsewhere on him.

“Marco. I just wish you would relax. You got a girl half naked, on top of you, holding your dong.” He seemed to tense even more in her hands at this, but Star wasn’t sure if she had just imagined it. “I think you are way past the point where you can mess it up,” declared Jackie. Then a
mischievous smile seemed to form on her face. “Well, I think I figured a way to help you relax, handsome...”

“Ah... and, how would you do that, eh... Jackie?” his face contorted a bit and then he flashed a strange expression at Jackie that Star was sure was Marco’s attempt at a sexy smile. Well, not a bad first try, Marco, I guess. She thought.

Jackie’s response eye twinkle was a whole other level, though. She let go of Marco’s cock. “Well. I am going to rub your shoulders, like this.” She proceeded to do just that, as she leaned over Marco again. “And I am going to kiss you, like this.” She proceeded to demonstrate.

Then, she separated her face from Marco’s and looked right into his eyes. “And now I am going to go down your chest kissing it again, and when I reach the bottom I am going to take your hard cock in my mouth and blow you until you are so relaxed you cannot lift yourself off this bed,” she declared in total seriousness.

Marco went bright red all over, eyes seemed about to fall out of his sockets. Figuratively, of course, Star noted, not like Glossaryck’s, thankfully. She dismissed that disturbing thought with a quick shudder. Then she looked at Marco babble for a few seconds without hearing much what he was saying. He was way tenser than he had been before and Jackie was laughing once more. She had said the previous line with a completely straight face and even a sultry tone that seemed out of place coming from the high school girl, but was now trying hard to repress her laugh. Star, however, wasn’t, “oh, you sneaky girl... hahaha... that was priceless. The look on his face. Awwww poor easily-embarrassed Marco!”

“W... Uh... eh... you, what? I mean... eh...” Then it finally dawned on him. “That’s mean! You did that only to see me get even more nervous!”

“What can I say? You are too cute when you are flustered.” Marco’s face seemed annoyed for a moment. That is, until Jackie clarified, “I am still going to do it, though,” at which point he went back to flustered.

Jackie’s kisses went lower and lower through Marco’s chest and the boy seemed to shiver a little as she did. Star was frozen now. Was Jackie really going to? Well, duh, of course she was, that was part of doing what it had been pretty obvious for a while they were about to do. Marco himself had explained her that whole thing with the bases, and it’s not like she didn’t know how it went on Mewni (it was, all in all, pretty similar, there was that whole step with the oils and silk that they seemed to skip on Earth, but in general...).

Then Star realized that she was seeing Jackie’s lips close around her best friend’s cock, and her mind went blank.

She should have been hurt at the fact that she was losing Marco this way. Or maybe horrified that she was looking at a friend doing this without his knowledge. But Star wasn’t either of those things. She was mostly just staring, eyes big as saucers and face glowing so hard you could probably use it to read a book... “Marcoooo.” She pulled her hands up from the bed and slowly roamed them through her own chest over her shirt.

She was, she decided to admit to herself, after long moments of indecision, very very horny.

Jackie’s mouth eased down Marco’s shaft and then back up. Slowly at first. Taking in only half length. Then deeper. Then faster. Then slower again. She tried flicking her tongue at the tip. Then breathing on it. Then moving her tongue around as she took it in. Star’s mind only half realized what Jackie was doing. She was too focused on taking off her own top and looking at Marco’s
flustered face, taking in the gasps and moans from her bestie. She allowed herself a brief spot of fantasy, in which it was her, not Jackie, the one making her bestie shiver with excitement in that very same way. Would she be able to do that half as well as the human girl could?

Star did realize, however, that Jackie was unsure of what to do, that she was learning what worked by Marco’s reactions, that she had never done this before and that she was nervous as hell. She was a quick learner, and there was no way Marco would notice her small hesitations and some of her sillier attempts while he lay in bed, eyes closed taking in the pleasure. Still, Star could see that this was clearly Jackie’s first time for anything after this point, and that the girl herself wasn’t nearly as relaxed as she pretended to be. None of it mattered, of course. Jackie was doing great. Marco was on Cloud Nine. Well, Star thought, she had been literally on Cloud Nine once and it didn’t seem quite that enjoyable, so maybe Cloud Ten or Eleven. Eleventy even!

Star was leaning over the edge of the bed. Left hand playing with her naked chest. Eyes darting from Marco’s expressions to Jackie’s movements. Her hand had somehow managed to get trapped between her legs, which now pressed it firmly against the middle of her pants. She hadn’t planned of touching herself that night until way after Marco returned from his date and everyone had ostensibly gone to sleep, but at this point it wasn’t a conscious decision anymore, it was a need. She was sure the images she was now seeing would be burned into her mind for future use as well.

Marco was panting now. Now it was his turn to grasp the blanket and Jackie’s movements became faster and faster. “Jackie... you should probably know... I am about to... you know...”

The girl took that as her cue to go even faster. Then, Marco seemed to shudder and let out a single additional moan. A moment later, Jackie’s eyes went wide with surprise. Not that she hadn’t been expecting it, Star reasoned. She was warned after all. “Which, by the way, was pretty thoughtful. Very Marco,” Star thought with some appreciation as she twisted her nipple between her fingers. Although Jackie was still inexperienced at this whole thing, she still gave it the good college try. She looked at Marco in the eyes, gulped it all in, and then slowly went up to hug the boy laying on her bed.

“Well... how was it?” she seemed hesitant. For a rare moment, Jackie seemed unsure of herself, her cheeks red as well. Marco didn’t respond at first and kept his eyes closed, Jackie seemed to start to frown. “I didn’t, you know, mess up, right?” She laughed nervously, trying to pass it as a cocky joke.

Marco kissed her. He had lifted himself of the bed and kissed her right on the lips and held it for a long time as the kiss became one of their most passionate. Star looked with approval, somewhat tempered by a slowly rising jealousy now that her hands were back to gripping the bed and her arousal was getting back to reasonable levels. “You so are a good guy, Marco Diaz, you know that, right?” She imagined for a moment having had to do what Jackie just did with Tom, her ex-boyfriend. How would he have reacted? What if she hadn’t been as good at it as Jackie seemed to have been?

“You know where my mouth just was, right?” asked Jackie raising an eyebrow as her lips and Marco’s became separated.

“I will probably remember that for the rest of my life. So, yeah,” Marco said. He smiled at Jackie and ran his fingers through her hair. “Jackie, that was amazing. I have been fantasizing about you doing that to me since, well, since I fantasize about anything, really, and it was still better than I had ever dreamed of...”

Jackie was red. Bright red. Jackie Lynn Thomas, professional cool person, was flustered from
cheeks to ears. Marco seemed to notice. His expression became surprised for a moment, then faded into a content smile. If Jackie had intended for him to relax, she had succeeded.

“You know. I wanted to ask, though...” he said innocently, “... that thing previously, the words, the whole ‘take your hard cock into my mouth’ bit. Where did that come from?”

Jackie went red once again. “Well, it is a long story...” Then, realizing what that sounded like, she smiled and seemed to regain a measure of confidence as she echoed Marco’s words, “you wouldn’t want to know, believe me.”

“Well, you know about the bra thing. Seems only fair,” Marco pressed.

“It is from porn, Marco. I just tried my best to come up with a line like the ones I have heard in a porno,” Jackie shrugged, but the effect was only partial, she still seemed a bit embarrassed about it.

“You watch porn?” Marco said surprised.

“Who doesn’t?” said Star.

“I mean. Nothing bad with that,” Marco hastily added. “I watch porn. I just didn’t think girls did!”

“Awww, Marco,” said Star.

“Well, I do, at least,” offered Jackie. “I know sex doesn’t really turn out like in pornos... usually,” she laughed. “But, well, they are hot to watch.”

“Not nearly as hot as what I am seeing now, though,” said Marco, his voice a bit deeper for a second as he looked Jackie up and down. He rolled himself to be on top of Jackie once more, which was easier than what she had done, since they had started sideways this time. “I think is only fair now,” he paused, “if I return the favor.”

Jackie seemed confused for a moment, then she smiled at Marco. “Romance movie?”

“Aw, come on!” Marco complained. “How did you guess?”

“Well, you are still going to do it, right?” said Jackie, smiling at him. Star gasped in anticipation.

Moments later, Marco was pressing his right hand against Jackie’s left breast, rubbing around in circular motions as he suckled on her neck and slowly made his way down until reaching the same height with his mouth as well. He was looking Jackie in the eyes as he flicked his tongue a couple of times over her right nipple, then lowered his mouth on it and began some slow motion that Star couldn’t see but was all too happy to imagine. The princess hands once more reached for her own chest. “Go get her, tiger!” she said with a bittersweet smile.

Jackie just pulled her head back and began moaning, first rarely and softly, then more and more desperately as Marco’s hands and mouth attacked her chest. He alternated sides with his tongue and lips, speed and intensity increasing in tandem with the girl’s noises. One hand always focused on the remaining breast while the other one unbuttoned Jackie’s pants and caressed her legs. With a grunt, the blond girl began thrusting herself out of her own pants and pulling away her own underwear.

“Marco. Get, the fuck, down there already!” she shouted. Star hoped the girl parents weren’t home. Fortunately for her, Mr. and Mrs. Diaz had gone away for the weekend, because the mewman girl was also making no effort to be quiet.
Star pushed her hand into her hastily-unbuttoned pants just as Marco lowered himself onto Jackie’s pink slit. Wait, did Earth girls not have hair there? Or had Jackie removed it as a fashion choice?

Star didn’t get to hold that thought for long. All she could concentrate on now was Marco’s face between Jackie’s legs, again seemingly moving slower at first then rapidly picking up tempo as Jackie began to thrash around the bed and moan even louder than before. Her naked chest panted furiously and a shiny layer of sweat began to form over her. Star was rubbing herself furiously but she was getting to where they were both going a whole lot slower than Jackie. She was on the hand local and the skater girl was taking the Marco express!

Jackie exploded with a shout into a convulsing orgasm then and the action in the portal stopped, leaving Star at the halfway station. “How was that even possible? Marco was a boy and this was his first time…” thought Star frustrated. There seemed to be no way he could be this good at it. Except. Star cheeks lit in realization, briefly flashing in the shape of two pairs of maracas, “Oooh… dancer mode…”

“Ahh... ahhh... Marco, that was…” Jackie panted, “I never... well, I have, but never like this. Damn, Marco, if I had known we would have started dating ages ago!”

“So...” Marco raised his head from between Jackie’s legs were it still rested. “You are basically saying you are only with me for the sex?” he asked, seriously.

Jackie blinked. “Eh... no... I mean, I am with you because you are kind, and brave, and always lift yourself up no matter what. I...” Marco was smiling. Star was laughing to herself, if still a bit bummed she had not been able to finish herself. She had gotten the joke before, but Jackie was realizing just now.

“Heh, you just wanted me to say that stuff, right?” Jackie smiled. Marco smiled back.

“Well, if you had said you were with me only for the sex that would also have been good for my ego,” he joked.

“Fine, Don Juan, I am in love with you both because you are a great guy and because that tongue of yours is a weapon of mass seduction, happy now?” she smiled broadly at Marco and then giggled as he went once again a hundred percent non-verbal.

“Eh, uh, ah…” he stammered.

“But honestly, Marco,” added Jackie. “I only hope this was nearly as good for you as it was for me.”

“I... eh... of course it was! It was awesome and you are awesome and... wait? did you say love?” Marco finally caught on.

Star’s mouth had been hanging open since Jackie’s confession.

“I mean...” Jackie started. “Dude, no pressure. I don’t need you to say you love me as well. I also don’t mean that I think we are soulmates or destined together or anything like that. But, Marco, you are my boyfriend, and you know I like you, and I know you at least have had a crush on me for a while. I think you said once that you wanted to get to know me better, and I am not sure if you know me better yet or not, but I have gotten to know you pretty well these few days, and I like what I see, a lot. So, yeah, for the time being, for now, I am in love with you. Hopefully nothing too scary for either of us, right?”

Marco opened his mouth, then closed it again.
Star opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“I… Jackie, it is not scary,” Marco seemed to struggle to explain himself a lot more than his girlfriend had. “Or, I mean, rather, it is, but only because I don’t want to hurt you. Not that I think I will hurt you. It’s just… Well, Jackie, you know I have liked you, a lot, for years. These few weeks have been a dream come true and this we just did is what all my fantasies have been about since I reached puberty. They were all about you Jackie, and they don’t compare one bit to the reality. You are the coolest, most awesome person I know…” Star frowned, “… and I think I am in love with you, too. But there is a chance that I am still too infatuated with you to know for certain that I am in love with you and not just with the idea of dating you. I don’t want to tell you that I am in love with you, with you really, until I am absolutely certain that I am. I think I am, just, well, playing it safe… hopefully that’s not too bad an answer…”

Jackie’s smile told Star that it wasn’t. The princess herself listened to the whole explanation with some amount of surprise. So, Marco wasn’t sure he was in love after all? Maybe he would fall out of love with Jackie, or fall in love with someone else. Nah, no way! He was in love, it’s just that he didn’t want to tell Jackie that unless he was extremely sure about it. He was just being the...

“Safe Kid!” Jackie laughed. “Awww… Nah, Marco. I can understand not yet having had enough time to tease apart the fantasy from the reality. Especially this early in the relationship. Maybe it is easier for me, since you weren’t my fantasy before, after all.”

Marco looked crestfallen.

Jackie raised and eyebrow. Right, kinda hard to complain after she had told him she was in love with him. “That was not a bad answer at all,” she continued. “Especially because now I know, that if and when you say it, you’ll really mean it.” She smiled at Marco and they stared into each other’s eyes for a few moments.

Star was feeling left out again, before realizing that she should be left out. She wasn’t supposed to be seeing this at all!

“By the way, Safe Kid,” Jackie asked after a few moments. “Do you have any condoms around?”

Marco blinked a few times, “… yes.” Then got up from the bed and picked his wallet from his pants. A moment later he was back in the bed, holding a strip of five condoms.

“Five?” Jackie asked.

“You can never be too prepared!” Marco answered. “What if we break one while opening it, or it falls behind the bed or…”

“Just fuck already!” Star cried.

Moments later, Star got her wish. Jackie had been jacking Marco back to full length while he again sucked at her breasts and caressed her insides until a finger or two slid slippery and easily into her. Star had begun rubbing herself as well, hand inside her pants, legs pressing against it. She saw the quick movement with which Jackie opened the wrapper and rolled the condom down Marco’s length. Again, Star wondered what it would be like to touch Marco’s stiff member herself and the thought sent a shiver down her spine. As Jackie lowered herself back onto the bed and Marco positioned himself to enter her, Star wished it was her there instead of the other girl. That it were her wet folds that her friend were about to plunge himself into instead of Jackie’s, her body pressed under his strong arms, her legs spreading to grant him entrance.
For a moment, a very brief moment, there was nothing else that mattered, nothing else that she wanted. Star wished, with all her heart and soul, not quite that she could replace Jackie - she couldn’t bear to wish heartbreak upon the boy - but to have Marco like she did, to somehow be with him in the same way the other girl was. Not just the sex, either, the entire thing: their banter, their nervous laughter, the way their eyes lingered on each other’s. But also, yes, the sex too, definitely! To be with him was in that instant her deepest heart desire. Suddenly, she was pushed backwards onto her bed and she felt the first slow but sure thrust enter her.

Star’s eyes opened wide. She was laying on her bed, as if an invisible force pinned her there, a force she couldn’t fight no matter how much of her strength she put into it. She had her pants on, her underwear too, and yet she felt something enter her through them, something thick and hard going in and out of her. She looked up at the portal, saw Jackie with her arms around Marco’s back as he rhythmically thrust into her. She felt the same rhythm pounding against her own cunt, sliding in and out of her with perfect synchronization to what she was seeing through her portal. Her wand was glowing a bright green, bright enough to cover the entirety of Star’s vast room.

“Oh no, Marco!” Star didn’t meant to do this. This was too much. Seeing it was one thing, but this, this was not right. She heard Jackie moan and she felt her own breath quicken. The thrusts came faster and faster now. She tried to go into herself, to dip down, to use magic to get her wand back or to cancel the spying spell. Her mind was going crazy, this was too intense, too fast, too wrong. “Oh yes, Marco!”

Star had stopped fighting it. Her moans mixed with Jackie’s and with Marco’s grunts. Her friend was reacting to the flesh and blood girl there with him, but for some reason it seemed his movement was in perfect synchrony with Star’s as well. She could feel her wetness drenching her underwear as her best friend’s ghost dick fucked her to a climax. All three of them riding the same intense roller-coaster. Back outside Jackie’s room, a red light illuminated the sky, but in Star’s room only green brightness prevailed.

“Jackie, I am going to...” Marco shouted, his voice breaking.

“Me, toooo... Marco!” Jackie shouted. Her legs going around to embrace Marco’s body and push it even more firmly towards her own.

“Me three!” exploded star.

Marco collapsed atop Jackie. Sweat drops glistening on his back. Jackie panted below him, her eyes almost rolled back completely into her head.

“That was... amazing!” Star was the first to recover. Then realized what had just happened. What she had done. Had she just... used her friend? Her smile turned into a frown and she began pulling herself off the bed. She grabbed her still floating wand with one hand and readied herself to yank it away. Her expression was one of anger, red hot anger at herself. This ended now. She shouldn’t have done that. Friends didn’t do something like that. Well, not without their friend’s permission at any rate.

“Marco...” Jackie was still panting under the karate boy, “… this is probably weird timing, but can I ask you a question about Star?”

A pale hand let go of the floating wand.
Old Flame

Chapter Summary

In which someone overstays their welcome, harsh words are delivered, the past catches up to our horny heroine (what? I mean the headband thingy! jeez!) and more characters are introduced to complicate an already entangled situation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2: Old Flame

**Continuity stardate:** This chapter takes place between “Running With Scissors” (S02E16b) and “Just Friends” (S02E20b) It also takes place immediately after Chapter 1. This story so far is considered compatible with SvtFoE season 2 events up to that point.

“About Star?” Marco asked surprised, as he rolled himself off of his date and onto the bed beside her.

“Well, I mean...” Jackie seemed unsure for a moment. Her cool facade once more slipping away. Star thought the girl maybe hadn’t yet fully recovered from the powerful emotions of the afternoon, or from her recent climax. On the other hand, perhaps she was just nervous about broaching this particular topic, whatever it was. But, Star thought, why would Jackie be nervous about something that involved her? And why on Earth or Mewni was she even thinking about that at a time like this, when she could be relaxing and cuddling with Marco? Because, well, that’s what Star would have done. As friends, of course! Besties could cuddle too, right? “It is just, Star is a cool girl, Marco. Heck, she is literally out-of-this-world. You two live together and do everything together...”

Star’s hand trembled over the wand, her cheeks glowing bright at the girl’s description, both of herself and her relationship with Marco. She could see Marco’s puzzled frowning look, though, she knew what was coming. She really ought to give them some privacy now. But she couldn’t. What was Jackie about to ask? Was she jealous of the time Marco spent with his bestie? And if she was, what would Marco’s response be? Star could not imagine Marco not being her bestie, but then again, what would he chose, if the one asking was Jackie Lynn Thomas...?

“Jackie, what are you trying to say?” replied Marco. His tone was serious but calm. He laid a hand on the girl’s shoulder, reassuringly.

“Well, Marco, it’s just that a lot of people at school always assumed you two were, well... a thing,” Jackie turned to look at Marco, and Star couldn’t help but notice how vulnerable the usually cool girl looked. She imagined she herself must not have looked too different, alone in her room, her heart half-stopped in anticipation of the oncoming hit. “I assumed that too. You know, before the sleepover thing. So... are you two or have you two ever...”
Star braced herself. Marco was a nice guy, a great guy, and he almost certainly truly loved Jackie, so there was no reason to expect him to do anything but the obvious. Right? He had to reassure his girlfriend.

He wouldn’t be lying either, Star knew. They had truly never been anything other than friends. She had realized things way too late to have it be otherwise. She had no reason to hope Marco would say anything else.

Yet, Star wanted it to be different. Marco had just been inside her, he had just made love to her, even if he didn’t know it. Well, he also had made love to Jackie, Star reminded herself. The difference was, with Jackie, he had done so knowingly and intentionally. Star felt a heavy weight in her gut. She ought to yank the wand at once, before she heard something that would punch her like a narwhal blast to the stomach. There was absolutely no way Marco was going to say anything she wanted to hear right now.

“Jackie, Star is one of a kind. She is amazing and every day of hanging with her is a super cool adventure.” Star begun to smile. Awww, Marco. She suddenly felt light. Jackie slowly began looking down, away from Marco, and Star could no longer see her face. “She is frustrating at times, but she is brave and cool and, more importantly, a really good person at heart.”

Guilt shot through Star’s entire body like lighting. A good person? After what she had just done? What kind of good person would ever use someone like she just had? No, Marco was wrong about that at least. She was not a good person.

“Yeah, Star is great, Jackie. As a friend.” Star’s heart sunk, bruised and constricted. Jackie slowly looked up to Marco again, surprised. Her cheeks still looked a bit flustered, probably from their earlier activities. “She is the best friend I could ever hope for. But in the end that’s all there is, we are just friends.”

Star’s entire body began to tremble. A tear fell down her left cheek. Of course, Marco, good-friend Marco, was just talking up his bestie, even to his girlfriend. But he still didn’t see Star that way, and in the end...

“I don’t love Star, Jackie…” Marco finished, and something fragile broke inside the Mewnian princess chest. “...I ...I love you.”

Star hit her flying wand with the back of her hand, sending it spiraling against the wall of her room. The green light flickered, the dark clouds exploded all around her, and the image of stupid smiling Jackie, and stupid misleading Marco finally fizzled away. Star knew he had done everything right, he had stood by his girlfriend while not putting down his best friend in the least. Yet she was angry at him. She had wished for something very different, something unreasonable and wrong. But knowing that what you wish for is wrong does not make you wish it any less.

Star sat alone in her bed. Marco liked Jackie, and she was just his friend, and she ought to have known that. Instead, she had used magic to spy on him, to insinuate herself in his most intimate moments with the girl he loved, a girl that was most definitely not Star. She had had every chance to stop: when she saw they were alone and beginning to get intimate, and then when things escalated sexually again and again. She hadn’t even ended it right after she inadvertently... she couldn’t even think it! She had stayed there, uninvited, until he had to explicitly tell her what was what: ‘I don’t love Star’.

In her huge dark room, she brought her hands up to bury her face in them, preparing to let herself cry for a while. She had to let the pain and frustration out, to deal with the confusion between what she knew to be true and what she felt she had just experienced. However, that was not to be, as she
was soon interrupted, by the worst possible person.

“Ouch, Starship. I am truly sorry. That really must have been harsh to hear…” spoke a low voice from behind the girl. It sounded sincere enough, concerned even, but that didn’t register inside the princess’ mind at all.

She was supposed to be alone in the house!

Star jolted into full alertness. She jumped up from her bed and grabbed her wand again, pointing it at the intruder. “Who is that?! Come out or prepare to get narwhaled! Wait... Tom?!”

Her demon ex-boyfriend sat on the windowsill, small flames coming out from the palms of his hands and traveling up the window frame. In the light of her wand, Star could see that he was wearing his usual ripped shorts and pentagram tee. He was staring at her with a sad look in his eyes.

Wait! He was looking at her while she was shirtless! In her room! When she was supposed to be alone!

“How long have you been there?!” she yelled indignantly, while she covered her chest with her left arm. With the right, she kept her wand trained on Tom. “Don’t you know it is super rude to spy on people?!”

Tom smiled and raised an eyebrow. Actually, he raised two, but you could only barely see the one in his middle eye when he did that. He waited for Star’s mind to process what she had just said.

“Oh...right...” Star lowered her wand and blushed in shame, realizing exactly how hypocritical she was being right now. “How... how much did you see?”

“More than I probably should have,” answered Tom with a sad expression. It dawned on Star that Tom liked her, really liked her, and he had just seen herself having... well, magic-proxy-sex with Marco or whatever.

“Mmm. Yeah. Me too,” commented Star quietly, lowering her wand. They stared at each other in uncomfortable silence. Tom looking dejected and Star covering her chest and withdrawing into herself. She turned her back to him, facing the opposite wall as she stood in the middle of her room.

“You still should go away now, Tom...”

“I probably should,” he admitted. “But, are you sure you want to be alone after that, though?”

The demon boy shrugged himself up the window frame. He floated slowly towards Star, a trail of fire following his wake through the room. Carefully, he extended his arms and put his hands on top of Star shoulders and begun massaging her back.

“Star, I know you like Marco. I get it. Any other day I would be firing up in rage over that. But I really can’t stand seeing you like this. We had something, Starship, and maybe it is long over now.” His hands moved from their positions, a single finger in each tracing a line of flames over Star’s skin, stopping just above her mewberty wings. The flames left a red trail, but no real burns. Star shivered, in a good way. That felt pretty good, a little bit of pain followed by a whole lot of soothing warmth. “But I’d like to think I can still at least make you feel a little better.”

“Oooohhh...” moaned Star appreciatively, and her eyes opened wide as Tom traced the side of her wings with a clawed finger.

He wasn’t half bad at this, and for a second she wondered why she had ever broken up with the
fiend in the first place. Maybe it wasn’t so bad that he was around now. Tom wasn’t who she had hoped for, but she had to admit, she was glad to not be alone in the house right now.

Five claws danced through her back, leaving a trail of light scratches and flames. It was just barely painful, but in a good way, or perhaps in a deliciously bad way.

“Star, what you did just now was pretty bad, we both know that.” Tom’s words hurt Star more than his claws, and in a less pleasant way. “Fortunately for you, I know a thing or two about being bad.”

The demon pulled back on her hair and kissed her neck, nibbling carefully with his pointy teeth, stopping right before piercing the skin. A single claw reached to the front began tracing one-finger flaming circles around the mound of her right breast. It started far away from the center, but slowly worked inwards closer and closer, following a sweetly torturous spiral. She felt her heartbeat quicken again and a wetness begin to build up in her crotch, one unrelated to the whole seeing eye affair.

Tom’s left claw grabbed at her ass through her pants, and she could feel a burning heat going through the fabric. His breath also felt impossibly hot on her neck, in both a literal and figurative sense.

“Face it, Starlight. You don’t belong with Earth-boy, Jackie does. They are both nice safe kids. But you, you are a rebel, you live for danger, for transgression. You belong with me…” he whispered in her ear, commanding and in charge in a way whispers had no business sounding. Guilt trip aside, that voice was so deliciously not safe.

Maybe Tom was right, maybe she did belong with him. And, would that even be that bad? Marco didn’t think of her that way, he just thought of her as a friend. Tom desired her, and the way in which he showed it was really turning her on right now. Besides, they had had lots of fun when they dated. He was always so confident and so dangerous. Why was it that they broke up in the first place? The claw reached her nipple and pressed in, with a sharp pointy nail. Star gasped, losing her train of thought.

She felt a claw going into the back of her pants, raking against her buttocks, pressing firm trails of fire and measuredly hurt skin. The hand slid out from her pants again and she felt it slap her through the fabric. Why on earth was him spanking her ass making her feel so good right now? It was not usually one of Star’s turn ons. At least, she didn’t think it was. Was it because right now she wanted to be punished? Because Marco was wrong and she wasn’t a good person? Maybe this whole Tom thing wasn’t really such a bad idea. Perhaps she had made a mistake breaking up with him, they did have much in common. They were both bad deep down. So, why had she ended things?

Of course, there was the anger thing. That wasn’t fun. One second Tom was being great, the next he was exploding in flames and threatening to hurt her. Yeah, that was not a good thing, but she was, well, Star. Even back when they had been dating, before her birthday, before she got the wand, the princess hadn’t been exactly defenseless against him. She had one mean kick, if nothing else. Now? Well, now Star had magic powers far stronger than the demon prince’s own. Tom couldn’t hurt Star, unless she wanted him to.

She felt a bite, on the other side of her neck, deep enough to draw a single drop of blood. Another smack on her ass that left it tender and red through her pants. Oh yes! Tom couldn’t hurt her unless she wanted him to and, right now, she did want him to hurt her. To punish her for what she had just done to her best friend, and to soothe her wounded heart all at the same time.

“You were always more at home in the dark with me,” Tom reminded her as his hand reached
around to the front of her pants, undoing the button with a literal magic touch. “Just let me show you how much...”

But there was another thing, though. A small voice in Star’s head was trying to remind her of something. It was not just the anger management issues, not just the rage and the fire and the threats. That was the easy part. The hard part was the plotting. The most infuriating thing about Tom Lucitor was how deceptive he could sometimes be. Not so much just that he lied, but that he manipulated, almost by natural reflex. He was always running some kind of mind game or another, not caring who he hurt to get what he wanted.

“No! Stop it,” Star demanded and slipped sideways from the demon’s embrace. “Tom, I know what you are trying to do,” she explained, summoning the last shreds of determination left in her. She had to set things clear, for herself and for him. To stop this all before it went too far. “This is not about making me feel better. This is about you coming on to me when I am vulnerable, and confused. This is you trying to get us to get back together, and you are doing so in a really sneaky way!”

Tom paused, the flames dancing around him turning up, eyes glowing red for a second, then he recovered back to a controlled but frustrated expression. “Can’t it be both, Star? Can’t I want you both to feel better and to be mine?”

“No no no, a million times no. We broke up, for good!” Star answered firmly, but not without some internal regret at not having let the demon prince’s seduction scheme play out at least for half an hour longer or so. Her backside, chest, and neck ached, but not nearly as much as her nether regions did. But it was not worth it to get tangled with Tom again. “And things like, well, like this, are part of the reason!”

His eyes glowed bright red once more, his claws tightened, fire danced in between them. For a moment Star feared she would have to deal with another Tom tantrum. That would certainly be the shitty cherry on top of this confusing painful night. Then, as suddenly as he flared up, he calmed down, and sat on her bed.

“Yeah, ok, I guess I get that,” he said finally. Then paused for a bit and looked down at the floor. “It sucks to like somebody that doesn’t like you back, though. Doesn’t it, Starship?”

Star sat on her bed, leaving a small token space between herself and him, feeling a lot less worried now. “Yeah. It really does,” she answered in a slow monotone.

“Can’t even blame you on Marco, you know? He is a great guy to hang out with... pretty good taste in music too,” Tom offered. Perhaps his version of an olive branch? There was a brief moment of silence. Star wondered if that was another ploy. It sounded like a sincere concession, but that was the problem with Tom’s schemes, they always sounded sincere. “Well, you are right, I should be off now.”

Tom took out a tiny bell from his pockets and hit it with an equally tiny hammer. Moments after, an elevator pulsed up by a flying demon materialized in flames in front of Star’s window.

“Wait, Tom?” Star said hesitatingly. “We are not getting back together, no matter what. But, you know... if you want it... we could, you know. I could do this for you. For old times sake.”

“Thanks for the offer Star... but no. At least not today,” he extended his arms, and a second later he had floated into the elevator and it had been engulfed in flames. A moment after that, Star was again alone in her room with all her bittersweet thoughts.
She was feeling better now, at least compared to what she felt after listening to Jackie and Marco’s last conversation. Tom had actually truly cheered her up a little, whatever his ulterior motives were. And she? She had just offered him pity sex. ‘Wow, Star, you really do mess everything up!’, she thought to herself.

But, had it truly been pity sex? Or had Star been genuinely excited about the idea of a one night stand with Tom? He was hot, literally and figuratively, and he could do things to her that even Marco, if she had him, would never dare do. Things that Star was pretty sure she wanted done to her. But Tom was a package deal, and she didn’t want a lot of what came with it.

She took off the rest of her clothes, threw a nightie on herself and got into bed.

Forgetting to even cry, Star fell asleep from exhaustion.

----

Star opened her eyes to find the canopy of her bed missing, replaced by a canopy of green leaves, illuminated from behind by the red and purple of a sky under a double sunset. She felt the bright emerald grass against her skin, cushioning her body as it lay there in the open forest. She heard the chirping song of birds she couldn’t quite recognize, harmonizing against the background sound of a waterfall which she couldn’t quite see from her position. From the looks of it, the princess was in a pretty great place, but not on Earth exactly.

“Uh. This is weird. Cool, definitely cool... but weird,” she told herself aloud, on reflex.

She reached around for her wand. Her eyes opening wide as she failed to find it under her pillow. She failed to find her pillow too, for that matter.

‘Ok, Star... either you are dreaming, got captured in your sleep, or something very fishy is going on,’ she thought, jumping to her feet. She began making her way out of the trees, towards the sound of the waterfall. Maybe, if she could get out of the forest and somehow get a better look at the sky, then she would be able to figure out if she had been in this dimension before.

Her hands pushed aside a few final branches of thick undergrowth and then she saw... well... she saw Marco. Except, not her usual Marco.

It was older Marco: sixteen years older, battle hardened, ripped, bad-ass, hot as all hell Marco. He stood there, bathing under a shallow waterfall, submerged inside the river up to his waist, showing his entire naked torso, flowing brown hair tossed around by the light breeze. He didn’t seem to have yet noticed Star, whose own form remained mostly hidden from him behind the last few layers of unfamiliar vegetation. He used one hand to wash the length of the opposite arm’s rather impressive bicep muscles.

“Dream. Definitely dream,” Star muttered aloud as her heart cheeks began flaring up with an almost blinding red glow.

“Got that right. But not your dream, princess,” said a voice behind Star, in a tone two parts annoyance and one part surprise. “So, I have to wonder, what’s Moon’s kid doing in here? Pretty sure her royal lameness would disapprove.”

Star turned around to see a short buxom woman glaring at her. She had pale furry skin, long flowing flame-red hair that almost reached the ground, and an unmistakable pair of huge yellow horns which dwarfed her tiny black crown. The flame floating atop her head was dimmed to a small candle, an arm set on the sorceress own waist.
“Hekapoo?!” Star recoiled in surprise at seeing the ranking member of the Magical High Commission here, of all places. Never mind the fact she didn’t know where here was to being with, other than, apparently, inside a dream. “Wait... not my dream? How can I be dreaming a dream that’s not my dream? That doesn’t make any sense!”

Then, after a brief pause, she added, “uh, does that mean it is your dream?”

“Oh, no, not mine,” Hekapoo said with a satisfied tone and a huge grin that showed her tiny white fangs. She pointed a stubby finger towards the waterfall. “His dream, actually. I am just, kinda, well, you could say I am guest starring. Not sorry.”

Star looked back at Marco, following Hekapoo’s gesture, just in time to see a second Hekapoo emerge through the woods on the other side of the river. That Hekapoo walked a few steps towards the waterfall and then stopped to sit in a nearby rock. The thirty-year-old warrior that was also Star’s bestie looked up, directly at that version of Hekapoo and raised an eyebrow.

“Hello H-poo. Care to join me?” he said with his smooth deep voice, his arms throwing his hair back against the falling water, as if he were simply continuing his cleaning routine.

“Tempting as that sounds, muscles, you know I don’t much enjoy getting wet,” the flame sorceress sitting on the rock replied with a grin and pointed a finger to the flame floating above her head.

Star looked between that Hekapoo and the one besides her in confusion, before remembering that the sorceress could create clones of herself. It was sort of her specialty. Well, that and the dimensional scissors thing, of course.

“Fine, I am coming out, H-poo,” Marco replied with a grin and begun wading towards the shore. “But I can make no promises about not getting you wet.”

Star got it immediately. Especially because she was nowhere near the waterfall, nor Marco for that matter, and yet already getting quite damp herself.

“Look, this show is not exactly going to be for kids, princess. You know that, right?” said the voice of Hekapoo behind her. She sounded more amused than annoyed now.

Star tried processing the situation around her, but her eyes kept going back to Marco, whose waist was slowly emerging from the water. His back was to her now: deliciously broad shouldered, well-toned, and covered in strange but intriguing tattoos in a language she didn’t recognize.

Notwithstanding that excellent view, Star felt very confused. Were these Hekapoos actually Hekapoo, or was she just part of the mewman’s dream somehow? If she was, then her mind had gotten really messed up. This was not her first wet dream about older Marco, not by a long shot. But it was the first in which she imagined any third person there, especially another woman, and especially Hekapoo of all people!

Maybe watching him and Jackie had given her a thing for, you know, ‘looking stuff’? Nah, that couldn’t be it! Could it?

On the other hand, maybe somehow she had indeed gotten into Marco’s dream. Magic like that was always a possibility, especially around Star. But then, it meant that even if Hekapoo wasn’t a figment of Star’s imagination, then she would part of Marco’s, which meant Star was still safe.

Either way, the real Hekapoo wouldn’t know anything about Star being here, and thus would not be able to tell her mom about this. Her mom must neeveeeer know, Star thought with a shudder.
Star’s train of thought derailed and crashed that very moment, when the perfect ass emerged from under the water, as Marco made his way up the opposite river shore. Star’s eyes went wide like saucers as she took in the toned buttocks of the man her bestie would, or at least could, become. The Hekapoo currently standing on the other shore with Marco also seemed to be looking down, composed, yet naughtily expectant, her small fangs protruding from a closed mouth smile.

“My, my, my, that’s quite the sword you got there, muscles,” she teased.

“Turn around. Turn around. Turn around,” Star muttered under her breath. But Marco didn’t seem to notice her. Then, a chilling thought broke through the horniness and Star herself turned around to face her copy of Hekapoo. “Wait, he doesn’t know I am here. So, if you know I am here, and he doesn’t know I am here, then you are not part of him! Are you?”

“Afraid not,” Hekapoo said, smiling at Star as she raised an eyebrow. “Although I fully expect to have a part of him in me quite soon,” she joked.

Star gave her a strange tilted look. Half of her wanted to groan at the terrible pun, half of her was green with envy.

“Both of me here are, well, me. And before you ask, I am not doing much to his mind, just getting my real self involved on something that was going to happen anyways. This is his dream, after all, I am just guest starring on it. This is just my way of getting a piece of the action his dream version of me was going to be getting either way. But, speaking of guest Stars,” she stressed the Mewman princess’ name, “I still don’t know what you are doing here…”

Hekapoo moved in an instant, seemingly disappearing in a blur, and then she was right in front of Star, standing between her and the clearing with the river. She moved her hand through the air, trailing a path of flame. Suddenly the flame seemed to illuminate a partly translucent thread of blood red light going from Star’s chest to the entrance of the clearing, becoming invisible again in direct sunlight. Slowly, a second beam appeared, a dark greenish shadow, gossamer thin, coiled around the first.

“Well, that’s unexpected,” the sorceress noted, looking down at the two translucent strands. As her hand finished the motion, the threads disappeared again.

“What was that? Did you do something to me?” Star jumped up and her eyes narrowed as she looked at the sorceress. She had instinctively raised her arm and taken aim, even though she knew she didn’t have her wand.

“Calm down princess, I was only checking something!” Hekapoo shot back annoyed. “Like I would do any harm to Moon’s kid! Imagine how awkward that would make high commission business alone, not to mention… never mind. The point is that, frankly, these are some pretty dark magics you got mixed in here. I really don’t know how you got yourself linked like this with… oooohhh… wow!”

Hekapoo gasped seemingly out of nowhere, which interrupted her stern admonition. Star saw the sorceress blush and smile. The mewman’s eyes darted to the other shore of the river, where Marco’s lips were pressing against his own copy of Hekapoo’s and a firm hand was gripping her left horn, pushing her close into a passionate kiss.

“So, linked, you said. Right?” said Star. Eyes narrowing again in suspicion.

“Well, yeah, the different versions of me are also linked, of course,” Hekapoo smirked back. “But what I was... ahhh… trying to say is… oh… nice… ooooh!”
Star looked back at the clearing and saw Marco’s other hand on the inside of his Hekapoo clone’s right thigh.

“Keep. Talking,” the princess demanded, in a surprisingly imperious voice.

Her own eyes did not move from the scene on the other side of the river. She wanted to know what Hekapoo had to say, but there was no way she was taking her eyes away from older Marco. Why wouldn’t he just turn around already!?

“Whoa, ok, commanding much? Guess it runs in the family. But, well, what I was trying to say is… mmmmhhhh... you two are linked, somehow, by magic… it’s complicated,” Hekapoo replied, with some difficulty.

Star would be lying if she said she didn’t enjoy the older woman’s discomfort as she tried to divide her attention, even more so because she could see the scene which caused such effect on the member of the magical high commission. Honestly, come to think about it, if you asked her, she would lie. It was kinda weird that Star was enjoying this, and yet… “What do you mean linked?”

On the other side of the river, Marco had pulled away from the kiss, if only briefly. They seemed to be bantering some more, but Star wasn’t paying attention to their words. Then Hekapoo got up, did something to the ribbon of her dress, and the entire thing fell to the floor, leaving her completely naked and only partly hidden from the princess’ point of view by Marco’s own nude body.

“Linked, as in, well, it’s hard to explain, but you are connected to one another by some form of old magic.” Star’s version of Hekapoo continued in a serious tone, as best she could. “Two links actually, one about a year old, standard soul-bond stuff, one true love, blah, blah, no big deal all things considered. The other one is very recent, however, and it is fairly dark magic too…”

Star’s heart skipped a beat. The All Seeing Eye spell? It was the only thing she could think about that might qualify as both recent and ‘dark magic’. Had she done something permanent to Marco and herself back then somehow?

“Give me a second,” Hekapoo interrupted her explanation. “Be right back.”

Star saw the other Hekapoo, the one with Marco, snap her fingers and the copy beside her flickered out of existence and right back again a moment after. Then, on the other shore, two more Hekapoos also appeared out of thin air, already fully naked.

“Three on one. Think you can handle it, muscles?” one of them asked the boy, no, the man before them.

“You know I can handle all of you, Hekapoo,” Marco answered confidently, his voice was melting Star’s... well, it was significantly further down than her heart.

“Look princess, dark magic is not a toy,” continued the voice behind Star. “Unlike many common spells, the dark arts always come with a price, with consequences. Many are just minor inconveniences which only add up with frequent use, but some can be outright catastrophic…”

The princess was barely paying attention to that lecture. Instead, she stared at the three naked devilish forms and Marco’s firm posterior. Each Hekapoo was a compact toned busty bundle of mischievous smiles and sex appeal, and they now moved on Marco like a well coordinated ensemble. Unfortunately, most of the action was still facing away from Star, but she could see arms rubbing in front and around the man’s toned form. She could spend days just staring at those
shoulders, and especially at that ass.

“Also, even if this is not one of *those* spells, dark magic, as a rule, is powered by a small set of strong emotions. So, I am going to guess…” her Hekapoo continued, in the background of Star’s distracted mind, “…a dark spell powered by lust. So, what the blazes have you been getting up to with that kid, princess?!”

Star’s cheeks went even brighter as she spun around despite her fear of missing out on the view

“It was not on purpose! I messed up. Please don’t tell my mom!” Star managed to say.

Her eyes went wide with fear. If the queen ever found out about this. Well, St. Olga’s wasn’t as bad anymore, but Star was sure she would be pulled away from Earth, at the very least. Which meant, she would be pulled away from Marco!

“Hahahaha... tell Moon?” Hekapoo just fell to the floor guffawing, a single finger clearing a tear of laughter from her eye. “Why would I tell Moon about anything of this? Like I want to explain what I am doing here to her either. All I am saying is, tone it down with the dark magic. Plenty of ways to have fun without the summoning and deal-making… mmmm… case in point.”

Star looked back at the other side of the river, where one copy of Hekapoo kissed Marco, while another ran her hands through his backside and the later knelt down towards his crotch.

“Look, kid, you are not putting the multiverse in danger by casting a spell on a boy you have the hots for, dark magic or not. Which, you know, is the kind of thing I’d actually be forced to report to the magic high commission: threats to any major dimensions and the like. I have no intention of tattling on you just because you are using magic to play with your human boyfriend, and happen to be a gigantic dream voyeur, princess. I am not that kind of hypocrite,” she smiled impishly.

“Besides, speaking of hypocrisy, let me tell you: you have no idea what your mom got up to when she was your age, no matter how much she denies it all now. Perfect princess Moon my furry ass!”

Wait, what did her mom get up to when she was her age? Nah, couldn’t be anything like this. Mom just got married to dad and that had been it, right? Right? But then, Star remembered what Moon had said to her about joining the game of flag. “Star, I did a lot of things you won’t be doing.”

For a moment, Star though of pressing Hekapoo for more information, then decided that she really didn’t want to know that much about her mom. Suddenly, another part of what the sorceress had said finally registered in her mind.

“Wait, Marco is not my boyfriend. He is Jackie’s... I mean, he and I are just good friends! And I am not a dream voyeur!” she shouted indignantly and, as always, unconvincingly.

“Oh, really? *Just* friends? Are you sure?” Hekapoo raised an eyebrow and smirked at the young princess. “This should be amusing.”

Star heard a deep low grunt behind her and turned around to see the three other Hekapoos had grabbed Marco by the arms and turned him around. Two of them began kissing his chest and roaming their hands through his arms, the remaining one winked right towards where Star was hiding.

Star almost missed the wink, her gaze darted directly downwards, to the hard manhood of her crush. She had seen a lot of it that time with Jackie, but still, apparently Marco had grown quite a lot between fourteen and thirty. It was, well, intimidating was an apt way to put it. Not that Star would ever be the one to back down from a challenge if the opportunity ever, well, *arose*.
“So, you were saying, just friends, and…” a sardonic voice behind her begun, as the three Hekapoos sat Marco on the rock one of them had been occupying before and ran their hands down his chest. One of them going up until she was able to plant a kiss on the hunk’s lips, two of them going lower and lower, until their faces reached the height of his member. A tongue traced each side of the shaft. Star’s eyes glued to the scene. Suddenly it seemed that it was way too warm out here, despite it being around sundown. “... that you are not into watching. Right?”


She barely noticed Hekapoo getting closer to her, the sorceress also staring towards the scene where she was thrice a participant. Marco’s powerful hands seemed to have grabbed hold of the breasts of the Hekapoo that was kissing his mouth, while the other two began taking turns taking the tip of his cock into their lips, while the remaining one licked the underside.

Whether because this was just a dream, or because older Marco was never really what she thought of as ‘her Marco’, Star didn’t feel anywhere as conflicted as she had when watching him and Jackie. This was not painful and confusing, just plain hot. Sure, Star was jealous of Hekapoo, but it was more like the kind of jealousy you got when you saw someone eating something that looked delicious. Well, exactly like that, actually.

Even across the river and the clearing she heard her best friend grunt and her heart raced. She wondered if Marco was already at his limit. After all, there were three Hekapoos there, and she seemed, well, experienced.

What happened next surprised her. His two hands left the middle Hekapoo’s breasts as Marco’s entire body moved lower and with a swift movement his hands reached at the two remaining copies, lifting them up by their backsides, which he also begun massaging.

“Got you!” he exclaimed. A small remnant of childish amusement was mixed into the deep forceful voice.

“Get on top, H-poo,” Marco commanded the middle clone. His hands grasped around the other two, until two fingers began rubbing the outside of each copy’s crotch.

“Don’t call me, H... ooohh. Ok.” The middle clone wrapped her arms around Marco’s neck and pulled herself up, only to then begin lowering herself onto his dick, just as Marco’s hands begun probing the other two clones, inserting one and then two fingers, while rubbing circular motions gently with his thumbs just above the entrance.

Star heard the breath of the Hekapoo she had nearby quicken, and saw she had pushed her own hand under her dress. The princess was severely tempted to do something quite similar, but that just seemed too embarrassing with the sorceress around, besides, wouldn’t that prove her point?

Marco’s movements started slow, but picked up pace quickly, both with his hands and with his hips bouncing the middle Hekapoo up and down, until it looked like she was riding an out of control warnicorn. Star could hear the moans from the other side of the river, except when they were drowned by the moans of the Hekapoo behind her. “That... ahhh... kid... uff... is... incredible! You are a lucky girl, princess Butterfly!”

“Yeah... lucky. Totally. Totally,” answered Star, a bit sullenly.

The middle clone flame seemed to grow and then go up and up and up, until, with a long moan of orgasmic bliss, she faded out of existence.
“One done. Two to go,” smiled Marco. “How was it, Hekapoo?”

“Do you even need to ask?” the clone to his right responded. Then the three of them got apart and begun to shift position, until Marco was laying on the grass and the two remaining Hekapoos lowered themselves on top of him. One over his hrotch the other over his face.

The clone near Star seemed to catch her breath momentarily. “Wait. You can’t be serious! You mean you two really haven’t done it yet?! I thought that whole ‘friends’ thing was just you being coy, princess. I mean, you obviously have the hots for the kid… so, what’s holding you?”

Star felt a pang in her chest. Wait, was the woman, a member of the magic high commission and a friend of her mom, no less, telling her that she should have had sex with Marco? It wasn’t like Star hadn’t considered that, but she had figured it out too late that she was into Marco, and by then, Jackie had already asked him out. So they couldn’t even date now, or kiss, let alone well, what he was doing now with three Hekapoos.

“He. He has a girlfriend... who is not me.”

“And you are letting that stop you?” Hekapoo smirked. “It would not stop me. Clearly it doesn’t here, and it wouldn’t in the waking world either if I were in your place. That boy is too good to let go of the chance. You... aaaaahh... you don’t know what you are... aaaaahhhhhhhhhh... what you are missing!”

On the other shore of the river, the Hekapoo sitting on Marco’s face had vanished with a long moan and a flame explosion. A moment after, the one sitting on his cock exploded as well.

Marco was sweating, and panting. Nonetheless, he stood back up almost immediately, glancing around expectantly, like a warrior expecting an ambush. “Another clone? So, there are more of you around, H-poo? Are you coming out, or do you want me to find you? Because you know I can play that game too…”

Besides Star, Hekapoo began walking towards the clearing. Then, suddenly, she stopped herself and threw one last, broad smile in Star’s direction, fangs showing. The princess was flustered, cheeks flaming red, legs pressed together, wondering what else she was going to see Hekapoo and older Marco do tonight. But nothing could have prepared her for what would happen next.

“Well, Old Flames, technically, but originally H-poo’s appearance was a (very) minor spoiler. Shame that my OCD with tagging ruins that on this site. Oh well, that is truly the least of the surprises to come.
**The Man of Her Dreams**

Chapter Summary

In which ethical dilemmas are solved by impartial and flawless logic, a princess is loved once upon a dream, and we get our first look into the thoughts of some of our other protagonists.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Chapter 3: The Man of Her Dreams**

**Continuity stardate:** This chapter takes place between “Running With Scissors” (S02E16b) and “Just Friends” (S02E20b). It also takes place immediately after Chapter 2. This story so far is considered compatible with SvtFoE season 2 events up to that point.

“Actually, princess, do you want to give it a try yourself?” Hekapoo had crossed her arms and was looking at Star with an eyebrow raised.

The Mewman princess felt instantly torn between enthusiastic agreement and conflicted restraint. She stood on the tips of her toes, clenching her fists right in front of her mouth, holding in a scream of joy. Her heart told her to say yes to the sorceress’ bold offer, her well exercised sense of adventure pushed her to seize the opportunity, her arousal bid her to not hesitate. Yet, something in the back of her mind disagreed, demanding her to think through her actions.

Star had a reputation, perhaps more well deserved than she often liked to admit to herself, for being reckless and irresponsible. But, over the last year, she had learned some painful lessons about actions and their consequences, and gained a measure of responsibility, especially where Marco was concerned. This, unfortunately, meant that, as much as she wanted what Hekapoo was offering her, she had to consider what this all meant for her and her bestie.

“Wait. What? Really? But, you? I mean, of course yes! But him?” Argh! This shouldn’t be a hard choice at all!

Since when did Star intentionally walk away from fun and excitement? And this was fun and excitement of the best kind! But, well, Marco loved Jackie, not her. He had said so himself. Then again, he had just fucked Hekapoo instead of Jackie too, three times! What did one go with Star change things? It didn’t. It shouldn’t. Not one iota. Right? Right?

“It’s only a dream, princess,” the sorceress goaded her on. “He doesn’t have to know you are not a figment of his imagination. Come tomorrow, you can pretend all this was a figment of yours for all I care. As for me, well, I could very well go another round myself if you say no to my offer, so either way he is getting some. But well, I expect that seeing the two of you will prove more... entertaining.”
“So it is you who is into watching, then?” Star asked, momentarily glad she could bounce back the older woman’s accusation. Hekapoo only shrugged, seemingly quite unembarrassed to admit so.
“And, you said it is just a dream, right? Marco is not betraying Jackie if it’s just a dream, and I get this stupid crush out of my system, and no one’s feelings get hurt, correct?”

Hekapoo shrugged. “I make no promises on all that other stuff. But I guarantee you it is just a dream, princess.”

With a wink, the Forger of Scissors pushed the last few branches aside and slapped Star’s back with her other hand, just below the wings, propelling her forward into the clearing by the river. Where Hekapoo’s palm had made contact, a burning mark began spreading through Star’s shirt, then her tights, then her boots. She barely felt the flames on her skin, but within seconds her clothes had burned to ash.

“Wait, what...? Hekapoo!?” Star turned back in surprise. She hadn’t said yes. True, she was about to. But still, what the hell? ‘Just a dream’, she reminded herself and turned again, looking up, ‘just a dream’.

“Star?” Marco called from the other shore.

His tone once more resembled that of the fourteen year old boy she knew, albeit on a deeper vocal register, with a note of surprise and confusion mixed in as well. Yet his body remained that of the hunky adventurer he had become while chasing the scissor maker.

“Star, what are you doing here and... oh, wow, I am so sorry!” he exclaimed, realizing something about the current situation. His hands darted downwards to cover his erection. He directed his eyes upwards and to the right, pointedly averting his gaze from his best friend’s own naked form.

Star had rushed to cover her chest and crotch with her arms as well, remembering only too late that her clothes were not there anymore. But when she saw Marco’s bashful look and embarrassed body language, she began to laugh. Apparently, even older Marco, when dealing with his best friend, rather than Hekapoo, was still, well, Marco. Star let her arms fall to her side and begun walking towards the edge of the river, feeling slightly more at ease. In a way, his shyness dispelled her own.

“Hey, nothing to be sorry about, believe me,” she said with a bright glowing blush.

“But, I mean, well, this is... I am not decent and, you are... well...” he was still looking away, towards the sky, still covering himself. “Star, you are naked too.”

“I noticed,” Star said as calmly as she could, even as her heart felt like it would beat itself out of her chest. She sat on a ledge by the river’s shore, dipping her feet into the water. “How do I look?”

“You are... well, you are too young for me to be looking...” he answered, nervously.

Star felt a pang in her chest. Crap, now this was embarrassing for real. Of course Marco wouldn’t look at her. She was just a little girl and her chest had had barely anything to cover, especially compared to Hekapoo’s. Ugh, this was such a bad idea! What was she even thinking?

She quickly noticed, though, that Marco didn’t seem disgusted or uninterested. He mostly seemed embarrassed and, well, conflicted.

“I mean, Star, I am thirty years old now, and I definitely don’t want to be a pe... a pervert,” he clarified.
Star looked up in surprise. Then back down, towards the water, checking out Marco’s reflection. Maybe he was right. This kind of age difference was something her parents had once warned her about. Even in Mewni, a princess was not supposed to allow herself to be seduced by anyone more than half again her age, unless her parents agreed to the suitor. Then again, her parents had not thought of the case in which Star was doing the seducing and, well, Tom was actually much older than thirty, chronologically, which came to show age and wisdom where not one and the same and... wait a second!

“Marco, do you even remember those sixteen years?” Star asked with a quizzical look. Marco turned to look at her, a puzzled expression on his handsome face. “What do you remember of yesterday? Or of your last birthday?”

“Star, my last birthday was before you came to Ea…” Marco began, then his eyes opened wide. “Wait, no, that doesn’t make sense. I remember chasing Hekapoo through that portal, I remember Nachos, I remember getting the scissors, and you finding me right after. There is also other stuff, a sense of dread and a sense of struggle in between those two other moments. But those memories are vague, like, like a dream. And yesterday, I think I was on a date with Ja…”

“See!” Star jumped, pulling her feet out of the water, a little too eager to stop Marco’s train of thought there. “This is just a dream, Marco. You are not thirty, not anymore that you were yesterday. You are just inside a thirty year old body again, because you are dreaming you are! But you are still fourteen in real life, like me. Which means you can swim over to this side and plow me without guilt... if that’s what you want…”

Star tried to sound confident when saying that, but her word choice just felt jarringly out of place to her, once heard aloud. She had considered adding something about how he clearly did want to ‘plow’ her, since he was dreaming of her. But it felt too manipulative, too unfair and confusing for Marco, too, well, Tom-like of her. He hadn’t really dreamed of her. She had somehow sneaked into his dream.

Still, Star hoped Marco would not say no to that, because as bold as the Mewman princess was prepared to be right now, as much as she needed this… a direct rejection from Marco while being there, naked for him to see and asking him for sex, would be a brutal blow to her heart and her ego. Besides, you know, leaving her more frustrated than hitting mewberty at Saint O’s!

“A dream?” Marco seemed to be looking at her again, up and down, as he processed the implications of her speech. “Oh, I don’t think I’ve had this dream before…”

Star’s heart sunk. But then she saw Marco’s smile. At once childish glee and smoldering hotness when coming from that handsome new body of his. He began walking towards the river, and then never stopped, as he seamlessly transitioned into swimming breast stroke until he was right by her side.

“I mean, I usually don’t look like this when you show up, but I guess dreams are weird like that,” he clarified.

“Yes, yes, totally, totally, weird dreams... always doing weird things,” she managed to reply. Star’s eyes were just glued to Marco’s biceps beside her, and then to his chest, and then, through the water, down to his very adult cock. But even so, eventually, she got to the point of actually processing his words, “wait, where do I usually show up?”

Marco held up a hand and began counting with his fingers. “School dreams, inter-dimensional dreams, bounce-lounge dreams, at-home dreams…”
“Ok, ok, Marco, but are any of those dreams, you know, this kind of dream?” Star asked, turning around in the water to face Marco as he leaned against what had previously been her shore. She placed her hands on those magnificent pecs of his. She wasn’t sure she wanted him to answer. Partly because she felt a bit guilty interviewing her best friend under false pretenses, and partly because she was more than ready to stop talking and get into the action. Still, she wanted to know.

“Not that I remember,” Marco said, making Star feel deflated once more, until he suddenly grabbed her by the chin and pulled her up for a kiss.

Star felt the blood rush to her face and a sort of electric current flow from her chest to her cheek hearts. She felt Marco’s lips press gently against hers, opening her mouth as his tongue darted inside. It was not a forceful kiss, but it was not shy either. The touch on her chin was gentle as well, even though Star sensed a strength in that hand she had never associated with the boy.

There was a deliberate carefulness to Marco’s advances, like he feared hurting her or scaring her, but at the same time there was raw animal power behind every movement. He might not have the mind of a thirty year old dimensional adventurer, but he had the body and the muscle memory. Star pushed back into the kiss with hungry desire and all the force she could muster. They held there for long blissful moments.

“But this seems like a good place to start,” Marco concluded after their mouths separated.

“Woah! Way to go princess!” Hekapoo cheered on unabashedly. She had reappeared on her rock, on the farther shore, fully dressed once more. She looked at the two friends with a smug expression and a double-fanged grin. She flourished with a hand in front of her and a huge bucket of popcorn emerged from a swirling portal of flames. She begun grabbing a handful. “Didn’t really think you could be so bold, kid. I underestimated you.”

“Hekapoo?” Marco seemed surprised and conflicted, “I, well, you went away…”

“Oh, don’t mhmind me, humhman,” she said, through a popcorn stuffed mouth. She paused for a second and then continued only after swallowing. “You just take care of your princess there. I don’t know what stories you read, but I don’t think she is just after a kiss from the handsome knight, if you catch my drift…”

Marco looked at Hekapoo some more and blinked, not quite getting the situation. Star felt herself annoyed at the interruption. But then again, she kinda owed the whole situation to Hekapoo to begin with, so…

“Apparently, she, well, she likes to watch, Marco,” whispered Star a bit self-consciously. “I guess I don’t mind, if you don’t. After all, is just a dream.”

Marco looked back and forth between the sorceress and his friend, dumbfounded. Star felt like she could just read his thoughts on the boy’s face. He thought that there was something very weird going on with his subconscious if this was his dream, and that perhaps he was kinkier than he thought he was. Well, dreams were dreams, after all, he seemed to conclude.

Star felt a bit guilty to be causing her friend such confusion, but, well, come the morning he might not even remember, and if he did, it was likely he wouldn’t think much of it. Dreams were dreams, after all.

“If that’s the case, Star, what you say we give her a show?” Marco winked at his best friend and then, as if making sure he was not scaring her away, ran a gentle hand through her soft golden hair. The princess shivered with expectant delight, and that was it for any remaining ethical concerns she
might have had.

Star was no longer sure if Marco was dreaming or she was. She moved like in a trance, and things seemed to flow differently from the way they did in reality. She felt Marco’s hands roam her back through the water, fingers massaging her wings and gently falling on her lower back. She felt her own hands touching Marco’s muscular thighs, pushing her weightless floating body to press a kiss on his mouth and her chest against his own. An instant later, the kiss had pushed the two of them unto the grass, somehow softly transporting them outside of the water and more than a meter away from where they started. Star was on top of Marco and was kissing down his neck. As she went lower, her ass made contact with something hard and upwards pointing, and she wasted no time to rub herself against it.

Marco’s hands stopped her. They grabbed her from under her arms and pushed her back up. Before she could protest, she felt his hands press against her chest, a strong pressure that gave way to individual fingers. A circular motion, a pinch, another press. Marco’s hands were playing the princess sensitive nipples like a fine instrument, and her moans were the music they produced. She felt like the ground had disappeared from them and they were floating among the clouds.

They, in fact, were. Somehow they were going up as they played with each other, laying on a white fluffy cloud. Both Marco and Star noticed, neither of them cared. He rolled her around, so he was on top, and began applying his mouth in earnest. To her neck, her arms, her breasts, her belly, her legs, her...

“Oh god! Marcooooo!” Star felt the man’s tongue go into her, and a shiver of pleasure flow from between her legs all the way to her fingers and toes.

He had just gotten started and it was already almost too much. It didn’t hurt, not at all. Star didn’t know if it was even possible for anything they did here, in a cloud in a magic dream, to hurt. But even if it were possible, Marco was being incredibly gentle, and she was probably wet enough that he could have stuck far more inside of her than his tongue and she would have been ready ages ago. But, for now, she just felt Marco kiss her sex, his breath on her insides, his tongue on her folds, and, eventually, his lips around her most pleasurable nub.

Star was melting into pleasure, and the sky itself seemed to change colors to the tune of her moans. It was still sunset. Eternally sunset. Clouds changed from red, to gold, to purple, as the Mewman princess’ breath quickened and the mounting pressure inside of her rose and fell, slowly gaining intensity through each loop. In another cloud, sitting with a knee over another and a half empty bucket of popcorn, Hekapoo was idly humming a song Star couldn’t quite make out.

Faintly visible through the multicolor sunset, shone a full moon, tinged slightly red, as if the celestial body itself were just as Star herself: aroused and blushing, blood shining through from below the surface. Even easier to miss - and in fact both Star and Marco did miss it - was the lone green star which managed to remain visible under the light of two setting suns. An omen which went unseen in the throes of their pleasure.

Star felt something powerful building up inside her. No, this was too soon for an ending, Star decided. This was Marco’s dream, she didn’t want to be greedy with his bestie’s dreams. Star’s hands roamed Marco’s hair and then she tapped on his arm. Somehow, he knew. He immediately knew what to do, and lifted himself briefly and turned himself so that his face stood in the same place, but his body reoriented so that his legs rested on the cloud above Star’s head. Stretching a little to make up the height difference, the princess positioned herself so that her mouth could kiss the tip of Marco’s member.

She licked a few times along the shaft and tried pushing her lips around it. After a few tries, she
managed to get most of that monster into her mouth, and began instinctively going up and down. Whether from having watched Jackie do this before, or because of the magic of dreams, Star felt that she got the technique mastered in no time at all. Her best friend’s grunts confirmed to her that it was not just wishful thinking.

Marco himself had also gone back to eagerly lapping Star’s sex and the princess could feel both of their bodies convulse with small waves of pleasure as they both built up to something larger and larger. She heard more humming from the sorceress’ direction. Suddenly, she recognized it. It was from a really cheesy and really annoying movie Marco had showed her three weeks after she got to Earth. A movie about a princess, but, you know, one of those princesses, the ones that were there just to be rescued. Marco had thought she would find it funny, but she mostly found it annoying at the time.

A pair of powerful hands gripped her ass and pushed her up towards Marco’s mouth. He was not just licking now, he was practically penetrating her with his tongue. It was not as intense as him sucking on her clitoris, but it was a strange sensation and, in her mind, she felt Marco’s hunger for her, and almost got over the edge on just that thought. She for her part picked up the pace, taking Marco in and out of her mouth in rapid desperate movements, darting her tongue around the head whenever she could. Lightning seemed to jump from cloud to cloud now as they changed to brighter and brighter colors, with no sign of approaching rain.

In the background, supremely amused, Hekapoo kept humming. And, despite her focus being otherwise occupied, Star could make the lyrics in her mind: ‘... but if I know you, I know what you’ll do… You’ll love me at once… the way you did, once upon a dream…’

The small part of her that still noticed felt annoyed at the Forger of Scissors.

“Maaarcoo! Let’s…” Star knew she was going to be done soon. She worried that if they finished, they might wake up. There was something the dream was clearly building up to. Something that was happening while they were this high on the clouds. She couldn’t explain how she knew, but she knew that once what they were doing came to a conclusion, so would the dream, and she didn’t want to end it this way. “... Marco, please, get inside me!”

“Star? Are you sure?” Marco seemed hesitant.

“Marco Diaz!” Star cried impatiently. “I am very very sure. This is just a dream. Your dream! So get on with it!”

Marco blinked. Star felt the guilt pour on her like a bucket of cold water. She hadn’t lied per se, but she was implying Marco wanted this and that it was just his fantasy, while it was her that had maneuvered him into the situation. Still, she would deal with the guilt later, right now she needed this. Like Hekapoo said, this was only a dream either way. Marco held her up by the shoulders. She opened her legs to give him access. He looked right into her eyes as he lunged himself forward.

Star woke up.

Star looked up. Saw the canopy of her bed. Felt her pillow under her head, and her precious wand still there. She swore copiously.

“Come on! Not even in my fucking dreams?!” was what the princess of Mewni said after exhausting the more colorful expletives.
Waking up extremely frustrated, Star had taken matters into her own hands. For the second time that night, she came alone in her bedroom, and this time, she had only the memory of Marco, rather than whatever weird magic projection had happened earlier. It had calmed her down somewhat, physically. But in a less immediate way, it had left her even more deeply unsatisfied.

She had hoped getting the crush out of her system in the dream would have helped her get over the whole Marco thing. It was really not good that she felt that way about her best friend, especially when he was happy with his new girlfriend. Star knew this could only end badly. And yet, she had to admit to herself that she was not over it, not by a long shot. If anything, that confusing dream had dragged her even deeper into the West Mewnian Swamp of emotions that was ‘the whole Marco thing’.

The worst part was, Star realized, that she wasn’t sure now that had really been Marco’s dream. Most likely, it had been her own dream. All she had was Hekapoo’s word that they had been inside Marco’s dream, and for all the princess knew, that Hekapoo was just a figment of her quite overactive imagination. That meant that, in the span of about eight hours, Star had: spied on her best friend while he was having his first time with his girlfriend, who was also her friend; involuntarily magically violated him without his knowledge; and then had a dream in which she creeped on him a second time and then manipulated him into having sex with her. A part of her mind reminded her that she never even got to the sex. Another part retorted that that wasn’t the point at all!

Maybe Tom had been right about her, maybe Star was just like him after all: impulsive, selfish, manipulative. Oh right, that too, she had also managed to hurt Tom’s feelings in the same night. He hadn’t even yelled at her. Not even gotten mad, and Tom always got mad!

Seeing him sad and hurt had been far more unsettling to Star than any rage explosion could have been. He had just told her that he understood her crush on Marco and that he would go away. Sadly, Star realized, that was what she should be doing about the Marco thing herself: just let him go out with Jackie, and don’t get in the way. If she could not do at least that much, well, then she was actually a worse person than Tom had been!

Then, why was it so hard to do just that? Why did she feel the impulse to cast the Seeing Eye spell again and see if Marco had woken up at the same time she did? To check if maybe the dream had been real? Or if he was instead sleeping at Jackie’s place, without a care in the world while Star needed him here…

“What’s wrong with me?” the princess thought to herself.

----

Marco woke up sweaty and confused. Where was he? This wasn’t his room! Who was... oh!

He looked down to see Jackie’s head resting on his chest, using it as a pillow. They were still naked, and the covers were nowhere to be found. But, then again, Jackie’s parents were away for the weekend and it was almost Summer, in California, so the covers were more cosmetic than anything else.

He remembered the whole date. The movie had been great, but he had scarcely paid attention to it, he had instead been focused on Jackie the entire time. He still couldn’t believe his luck just to be dating her. Jackie Lynn Thomas. When she asked him to walk her home, he figured he was just being a gentleman. When she told him to come up just for a bit, well, he had had his hopes, but quickly reminded himself that it was probably not what he thought and to not ruin things with the girl of his dreams just because he was getting horndog thoughts. When Jackie had taken off her
shirt, well, at that point Marco’s brain had fully given up. There was no way he could be this lucky, and yet, he was.

The events of the previous night played on his mind. Jackie had been amazing, and he, well, Marco thought he had managed to not mess up things too badly at any rate. And, she had said, she had said she loved him! And he had said it back! And then they had fallen asleep and… and Marco had dreamed about two other women while laying there with the girl of his dreams.

He had somehow gone and reverted to the Hekapoo-dreams, which he had had for weeks after the dimensional scissors incident, way after his memories of the time in her dimension had mostly faded away. He didn’t know why, is not like he had ever done anything with Hekapoo during the time he was away from Earth, at least nothing he could remember. With holes in his memory the size of oceans, he couldn’t quite say for sure.

He hazily remembered their bantering, their flirting, their chase across entire continents, but nothing quite like that. Yet he had dreamed about fucking Hekapoo many times after he got back to Earth. Then again, the dreams had gone away for a while now. Maybe having his first time with Jackie triggered a weird association in his mind? Still, did dreaming about other people constitute cheating? Would Jackie be mad if she knew? It is not like he could control it, but…

Shit, Star! He had not only dreamed about having sex with Hekapoo. He had dreamed about, well, about sixty-nining Star, and possibly intended to do more than that. He had dreamed about creeping on his best friend while being a thirty-years old guy. That was fucked up. Man, if Star ever knew he had dreamed something like that, she would kill him!

The worst part was, it had felt alright. It hadn’t been a nightmare or a crazy messed up dream. Well, it had been crazy and messed up, but he had enjoyed it.

He had never thought of Star that way, or, well, at least not more than he suspected most teenage boys thought of their teenage female friends in that way. Which is to say, only very occasionally, if the situation put his mind into a strange place. But now, he couldn’t stop thinking about that dream. How Star had looked naked, how she had acted, and what she had said to him, what she had asked him to do…

He reminded himself that it was a dream, that the real Star would never ask for something like that from him. Well, not unless Mewberty was something you could go through twice, which he thought unlikely.

Then he looked down, to his girlfriend, sleeping on top of him with a relaxed expression. Not a care in the world. The girl that had just confessed love to him. The girl who was way way out of his league. The girl that had just given him her first time. The girl he didn’t deserve. And he was laying there with her, thinking about sex with his best friend instead.

“What’s wrong with me?” the karate boy thought to himself.

----

An hour or so later, Marco was again fast asleep, snoring. Jackie woke up and gently lifted her head from her boyfriend’s chest. Last night had been great. The movie had been kinda lame, but the cute boy being adorable and bashful had more than made up for it. ‘Ah, Marco Diaz, if only you realized how charming you actually are under all those insecurities of yours.’

She had seen that in him before, and last night, she had seen a lot more of it.
True, she had had to put some effort to contrive the right situation for him to finally sleep with her. The boy had spent the last few weeks being first charmingly, and then frustratingly, oblivious to any hint even slightly more subtle than her undressing in front of him. But, after they got started, there had been a few times when Marco had really taken charge of the situation. Especially near the end, Jackie recalled, and her toes curled involuntarily. ‘You are smoother than you let on, Diaz,’ she thought.

But well, she was the opposite, wasn’t she?

She had been so afraid during the whole thing, even if it had been her idea, afraid that she might not know what to do, or how to play it off, that her mask of coolness might slip. Many in school would say Jackie was an effortlessly cool girl. She knew better, she knew that ‘effortlessly cool’ took the most effort.

That was part of why she liked Marco. Marco could fail, he could fail spectacularly and make a fool of himself and then dust himself back up and try again. She had learned to do that herself when she learned skateboarding, but somehow, she felt she had forgotten how. Now she did not dare make a fool of herself, especially not in front of others. Except perhaps, maybe sometimes, with Marco. The boy really acted like he thought the sun shone out of her bottom. But what if she failed to live up to that? Well, that was the thing, she didn’t think Marco would think any less of her even if she did.

Still, there was one girl in the whole Echo Creek school that was actually effortlessly cool. As in, she didn’t care about the concept of cool at all and yet she was intrinsically cool, just by virtue of what or who she was: Star. That was the other thing that Jackie saw in Marco, if she forced herself to be honest about it. She saw his friendship with Star. The two were inseparable, and Marco might not realize it, but he reflected Star in more ways than one.

Now, most girls would be jealous to know their boyfriend lived with another girl, especially if it was as amazing a girl as Star Butterfly. And maybe, maybe a little bit of Jackie was jealous, or worried, or unsure about it. But there was one part of her that felt strangely happy about it. A part that had felt disappointed, rather than relieved, when Marco had said he wasn’t in love with Star, or even interested. She had even had to hide her face when asking, so that Marco couldn’t notice the eagerness she felt in asking. She had let him believe it was uneasiness instead.

It was not that Jackie was attracted to Star, not at all, she was pretty sure she was exclusively - or at least very much primarily - into boys. And she did love Marco, either way, for who he himself was. Whatever self-esteem issues he had, Jackie had no doubt she was in reality the one getting the better deal. The boy was smart, brave, and way cuter than he himself knew. Yet there was something about the idea of Marco and Star that made him even more attractive to her, even as it worried her and confused her. It was majorly weird, impossible to explain, and probably the opposite of how any other girl Jackie knew thought or ought to think, but the feeling was there.

“What is wrong with me?” the skateboarding girl thought to herself.

----

In another dimension. A certain flame sorceress woke up with a wide grin. She lifted a hand and the cover magically slid away from her body. She sat up while humming to herself, a song she had learned while keeping tabs on the quite amusing boy from Earth. It was the same song she had hummed while watching the princess seduce her best friend. She walked down stone stairs in the palatial temple she was currently using as a Summer home, and proceeded to make herself some breakfast.
“What? Me? There is nothing wrong with me,” Hekapoo spoke aloud to the empty room.

Chapter End Notes

_I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream_
_I know you, the gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam_
_Yet I know it's true that visions are seldom all they seem_
_But if I know you, I know what you'll do_
_You'll love me at once, the way you did once upon a dream_

- Disney - Once Upon a Dream

And dreams do always come true for magical Disney princesses, right? Right?
Chapter Summary

In which our final protagonist is introduced, a master plan is secretly hatched and we get a new perspective on familiar events.

Chapter Notes

**Content warning:** SFW. I repeat, this chapter is SFW (except perhaps because of teenagers saying ‘fuck’ a lot). Yeah, ironically the one chapter with ‘Porn’ in the title contains no porn. My deepest apologies, and I assure you we will return to your regularly scheduled fuckfest in Chapter 5.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 4: Plots within Plot within Porn

**Continuity stardate:** This chapter takes place mostly during and around the SvtFoE episode “Just Friends” (S02E20b). This story so far is considered compatible with SvtFoE season 2 events up to that point.

The next morning turned out to be majorly awkward. Marco arrived when Star was having breakfast. She had been slowly nursing her cereal while sitting in front of their TV set. Her thoughts left her with little appetite, so it had been a slow going. She had been sitting there for half an hour and still was only halfway through the bowl when Marco showed up. He seemed to avoid looking at her, and Star was having trouble with how to act towards him as well, given all the confusing scenes playing inside her head.

“Hey, good morning, Marco!” she said, hoping she sounded cheerful enough.

It tore at her heart to pretend that last night had not happened. But, she realized, to him, it hadn’t. None of it. Not her spell, nor her weird dream. She had decided it was unlikely that it had truly been his dream. It must have been just Star’s own mind playing cruel tricks on her.

“Hope you had a fun date with Jackie last night…” she added, as casually as possible.

“Ah, ahem, yeah, watched a movie,” he replied.

Should Star tease him on that? He had arrived the next morning! Even without spying on him, she should suspect he had stayed at Jackie’s place, and tease him. Right? It was the proper friend reaction. Maybe it would be suspicious that she didn’t. Then again, what if it wasn’t obvious from just when he came back? What if he lied about it and then Star had to walk the fine line between not believing him, but also not not-believing him too strongly, since she wasn’t supposed to know
“Hopefully you weren’t too bored without me around, Star,” he interrupted her thoughts with a disarmingly apologetic smile.

“Me? Bored? Pfff! No way!” she replied, a little too vehemently.

Nice save, Marco. Now she could pretend his little distraction worked and they didn’t need to even get into the topic.

But, well, what to talk about instead? Every topic that came to the princess’ mind was related to her feelings for him, or to her overwhelming guilt over the last twelve hours. She supposed she could mention Tom showing up, but what if Marco pressed for details, or insisted on going after the demon? Yeah, that would be totally awesome, Marco chases Tom to hell to let him have it for creeping into his best friend’s room at night, and Tom just calmly explains to him what kind of per...son Star really is. No, no thanks.

“So... see ya later, best bud. I have plans, to go to the mall, with Janna! Yeah! So, later!” was all she managed in the end.

The weird thing was that Marco had seemed as relieved as she had been when she actually headed out. Was he really that nervous to admit he had slept with Jackie? Most guys in school would be bragging about that. Maybe he just didn’t want to brag to Star? Or maybe... did he remember the dream?

Star waved her magic wand to summon her trusty friend cloudy. She hopped right in and waited until she had put some distance between her and the Diaz’s home before dialing.

“Hey, Janna banana, want to go shopping right now and pretend we had planned to do that all along since well, about two hours before this conversation happened?” she spoke quickly into her phone as she floated towards the mall.

Janna’s response was far more laconic, “Sure, Star.”

----

Eventually, after a few hours of browsing randomly at the mall, they ended up at Janna’s place. The room shared the girl’s aesthetic: metal band posters, a glass box containing her pet snake, three skulls, plenty of candles and weird looking talismans, a wardrobe full of mostly greens and blacks, Marco’s library card on top of the bedside table, a large bookshelf full of old poetry books, and, perhaps most surprisingly unless one really knew her, bright pink bed sheets.

There were also a pair of fettered chains that Janna had asked Star to magic up, attached to one of the walls. When the princess had asked what Janna wanted those for, she had just winked and then made up a story about them being decorative. She had insisted on a key for them and having them be functional, though, so Star didn’t quite believe the pretense.

“Ok, Star, so, I believe this is the part where I ask what was really going on this morning,” Janna said with a shrug, as they both sat on the floor.

“Janna... well, I kinda do need to tell this whole mess to someone, because I am afraid I will go crazy otherwise or do something... extreme,” the princess began.

Janna raised an eyebrow. Star Butterfly had once placed mines in a football field, and she routinely blasted people with horned whales. She was not about to judge, but she was not sure she wanted to
know what her friend considered extreme.

“Calm down, Star, you can tell me anything,” she reassured the mewman.

Besides, she loved secrets. She knew most of Marco’s. She had managed to extract some very juicy stuff from Jackie over the years too, despite how private the skateboarding girl suddenly became when you dug pass the first few layers of relatively tame secrets. She also knew all about Ferguson’s obsession with furry porn, which was just a bit more than even she wanted to discover. So, really, nothing Star could tell her should be able to shock her.

Then again, this was Star we were talking about. She ventured a hopeful guess, “you killed a person and need help hiding the body?”

“What? No! But, Janna, I really need you to swear an oath, on your life, that you will not repeat to any living soul what I am about to say…”

Whoa, Star seemed serious. Which meant, this was going to be seriously juicy stuff. No way Janna could say no to that!

“Sure, I swear,” she shrugged like it was no big deal. Star seemed to look at her expectantly. “Ok, ok... Star Butterfly of Mewni, I swear to thee on my life that I shall not speak of what you are about to tell me with any other living soul. How was that?”

“Well, my mom would have some corrections on the wording. And the ‘thee’ is a bit unnecessary. But you know what? It is good enough for me!” Star seemed excited, she took a deep breath and then… “So-last-night-Marco-and-Jackie-were-out-on-a-date-and-I-was-bored-and-they-said-they-were-only-going-to-the-movies-so…”

Janna nodded and said ‘aha’ at all the right moments. Except for that, it took all of her concentration to keep up with the hundred miles per hour of Star’s tale.

In the end, she thought she had managed to understand most of it, although the princess herself seemed confused about what had happened with the whole dream bit. Well, that part probably mattered very little, actually. Her mind began running through the possible courses of action once it seemed clear that Star’s tale was drawing to a close. Of course, the easiest would be to tell Star to forget all about her crush, but that would not be fun at all. Besides, given what she just heard, Janna did not think suppressing the feelings and waiting for them to go away was going to work for Star.

“Ok, so, you are in love with Marco, right?” she confirmed the obvious.

“Well, I wouldn’t say ‘in love’, he is a great friend, and he is cute, and I might have the teensyest, tiniest crush on him…” Star corrected her, unconvincingly.

“Do you want to date him, or do you mostly want to fuck him?” Janna pressed on. After all, one was easier than the other.

“Janna!” Star shouted, seemingly shocked. Then she placed one hand under her chin and seemed to ponder for a second, “Well, since you are bound by an oath of secrecy and all… I think I want both. Perhaps I’d really settle for the second one right now. Maybe just that would be enough to, you know, get over the whole thing, then go back to the way things were before. But, Janna, he is with Jackie! And he loves Jackie, and she loves him back. Even if I could compete... which, I don’t think I could... I don’t want to ruin that for him!”

“Ok, so the priority is that Marco should not be hurt by this, correct?” Janna asked and Star
nodded. She ignored Star’s assessment of her competitive chances for now. Honestly, the princess probably had more cards to play there than she realized, but it would not matter unless she had the guts to go for the kill. “How about Jackie? How much do you care about her getting hurt?”

“Janna! Jackie is my friend too, and she is not doing anything wrong. Of course I don’t want to hurt her!” Star seemed genuinely offended at Janna’s question. The troublemaker girl smiled at that.

“Calm down, Star. Remember, Jackie is my friend too. Way before we two met. I am not sure I would even help you if you wanted her hurt... but it does complicate things,” the dark-haired girl admitted.

She thought about it some more. This was a significantly harder problem than, say, cracking Marco’s latest computer password, but also more fun, and probably more rewarding. That guy was into some pretty vanilla porn anyways, so the best thing in his computer were actually his embarrassing childhood pictures, and that cheesy poem about Jackie he wrote ages ago.

“Ok, and you said Tom tried to manipulate you into going back with him, right?” Janna confirmed, finally figuring something out. “What about him? Do you care if he gets hurt?”

“No, of course I don…” Star hesitated. “Well, not like I care about Marco and Jackie. But I don’t think I want to hurt him too much either…”

“Any chance you want to go back to dating him instead of Marco?” Janna had to ask. It was the easiest solution in any case.

“Ugh, no way! I mean... maybe he is what I deserve, but, he is not what I want, ok?” Star looked down, guiltily.

“I mean, from your story it sounded like you regret not sleeping with him, Star,” Janna commented, setting the bait. “The claws thing sounded wicked hot!”

“Oh, it was! Super hot. Way hot. But, well, Tom and I, is not really a good match, you know, as people…” Ok, ok, getting somewhere now.

“But you would still fuck him just the once if you could, right?” Check.

“What the hell, Janna!?”

Pause.

“Yeaah... I totally would.”

That was it! Checkmate!

“Ok, Star. I got it all figured out. I can’t promise no one will get hurt, but it has the best chances to work out for the best for all five people involved. Here is what you are going to do, you are going to get three concert tickets to that band Marco and you love so much, which is, coincidentally, coming to Echo Creek soon, and you are going to invite Marco. Then…” this was the delicate part, “… you are going to invite Jackie too!”

“What?!?” Star’s eyes went wide. “Oh, I see, maybe if I include her in our friendship I can make it up to her for, for spying on them and stuff…”

“Sure, you can think of it like that,” Janna ran with it. The plan would work best if Star was unaware of where things were going anyways.
Now Janna only had to make sure what she knew about Jackie was still current, maybe give a push or two to the other people involved. This was an ambitious plan, she knew, way more moving pieces than most of what she usually got up to, and very little chance to influence things personally after they were set in motion. She knew that, after Star left, she would have to run through the whole scenario a few times before she even called Jackie over to talk.

Of course, it was not as if she could tell the other girl anything directly, an oath was an oath after all. Also, was she so sure that she could predict how he would react? She had some clue about it from what she knew from Marco, and what Star herself had just told her, but what if she got him all wrong?

“Hey, Janna... by the way... do you think I am a horrible person?” Star asked, suddenly teary eyed.

What?! Janna was taken by surprise, her mind was elsewhere. Her train of thought was halfway across Siberia when it was forced to a screeching halt. Well, she could always plan the details later, right now she focused on her friend’s question.

“What? No way, Star! You are sometimes a bit brash, sure, but you are one of the most pure hearted people I know!” Janna spoke truthfully.

“But, but I spied on Marco!”

“Who hasn’t?”

“And had magical sex with him without his knowledge…”

“By accident!”

“And hurt Tom’s feelings real bad…”

“After he tried to guilt trip you into dating him. If anything, he deserves far worse.”

“And tried to seduce Marco…”

“In a dream,” Janna concluded. “Star. Please. Based on the evidence presented I, as your judge, conclude that you might be a great rebel princess… but you suck at being a bad girl! Believe me! I mean, I actually am one, you know? You do not even qualify for consideration to the bad girl club.”

Janna tried her best to have Star not being that bad of a person sound like an insult. “Bad girl card application rejected! Try again never.”

They looked at each other in silence for a moment, and then, both girls started laughing. Star seemed worlds more at ease now. Maybe calm enough to survive the next few weeks. Janna almost felt bad for what she knew Star would need to go through even if the plan succeeded. But, in the end, it was for the princess’ own good and, more importantly, Janna’s as well.

----

Jackie made her way to the Diaz’s home carrying two extra skateboards in her arms. She had spent the whole morning designing them and getting them printed by her uncle on his break. She was really excited about this, she had been since Star had called her and told her that Marco was inviting her to go to the Love Sentence concert, and whether she minded if Star went with them. Well, of course she didn’t! She had made sure to have a skateboard for Star too, just to make sure she felt included.
It had been a few weeks already since she and Marco did it for the first time. Their dates ended at her place or his a lot more often now that they did before, but the requirement to keep things secret from their parents meant that they hadn’t had any other opportunity to let themselves go at it quite like that time. Jackie got the feeling Marco’s parents were mostly truly oblivious. Hers just purposefully ignored things in a way that required the two kids simply to maintain plausible deniability about what they were doing, if only to avoid mutual generational embarrassment. But either way, they couldn’t be quite as brazen or quite as loud as they had been that one time. Making out was easy, and some level of heavy petting was sometimes within reach, but sealing the deal required more privacy than they were usually afforded.

Well, it was only a matter of waiting for another opportunity like that, when either set of parents went on vacation or something. Funnily enough, when she had mentioned the Love Sentence concert to her mom, she has made a point of letting her daughter know that she and her father would be out for the night, and not to hesitate to bring her friends home after the concert. Jackie had to admit that sometimes having ex-hippie parents paid off. The admonition to wear protection, and the revelation that she herself had been conceived after a concert were, however, somewhat less welcome.

She pushed the doorbell and Star opened the door wearing a t-shirt with what seemed to be the three of them on it: Marco, Star, and herself.

“No way! You made concert tees?” she asked excitedly. “That’s so funny, ’cause I made concert skateboards!”

For some reason, Jackie felt a jolt of joy and relief when she saw the funny t-shirts. So Star had included her on her design? Well, it made sense since they were all going together and they were all friends. But still, Jackie hadn’t hung out much with Star since she started dating Marco. She had begun to worry that maybe Star resented her in some way deep inside. The tee gave her reason to believe that was not the case.

She traded gifts with the mewman princess and went past her to say hi to Marco, who seemed to be struggling with his own t-shirt. Apparently Star hadn’t taken into account that the boy was a bit larger of frame than the two girls and had simply made all tees the same. But honestly, Marco looked hilarious with the t-shirt and Jackie was not about to criticize Star’s gift, so she just reassured Marco on it a little bit. Marco took a lot of reassurance, but he was cute, so she didn’t mind.

Moments later, they were all skateboarding towards the arena. Well, she was skateboarding, Star was on her cloud, with the skateboard between her and the pink floatinguffy critter. But hey, if it worked, it worked, and Jackie had to admit it looked pretty cool. Marco was, well, a bit behind them. But maybe that was good. This was Jackie’s chance to ask Star a few things alone.

Of course, before she could bring herself to say anything beyond small talk, Marco ran over some baby ducks.

----

“So, Star, can I ask a random question?” Jackie finally worked up the courage to ask as they waited for Marco (and the ducks) to come out from the doctor’s office. Sure, the doctor was a veterinarian, but she had agreed to look over his injuries too in a non-professional capacity, in case there was anything that needed someone else to look at him. “How do you feel about Marco?”

“What? What do you mean? I mean, he is my bestie!” Star reply had started in a note of shock, but ended cheerfully. After a pause she seemed to think a bit and add, “He is super awesome and you
are a very lucky girl to have him. And he is lucky to have you too, of course!”

“Heh, Star, dude, I know. But well…” Oh god, what was she saying? There was no way she was bringing this up. She just couldn’t. “You two do a lot of stuff together, and have been to a lot of places, and have all sort of wacky cool adventures…”

“Awww. Yes, we do, sometimes. As friends, though! Best buds. That’s us!” The princess sounded nervous.

Was she thinking that Jackie was accusing her of something? Or that she was being the jealous bitchy girlfriend that got between her boyfriend and his friends? Maybe she shouldn’t have said anything. How to explain that that wasn’t it at all, without saying something that would make her sound like a crazy person!

Star seemed to ponder for a while. “You know, Jackie, we can include you in our adventures too. If you want, of course. Although, fair warning, it might get a bit weird, and a bit wild!”

“Well, I am fine with weird,” Jackie remarked, managing to keep her cool. Understatement of the century, though. Right now, pink floating cloud or not, Jackie wondered if perhaps she wasn’t so much weirder than Star, just based on the way she felt. “I mean, if you don’t mind. If it’s not weird to have me along.”

“Whaaat? No way. Why would that be weird? That isn’t weird. Not at all!” Star replied enthusiastically, although Jackie felt something was off. Maybe she imagined a twitch on the princess’ left eye? “Marco would love it.”

“Then I do want to join you adventuring! Just some of the time, no pressure, though,” Jackie said. It wasn’t what she had wanted to ask. But it was close enough, for now. “You know something, Star?”

“Eh, what?” the princess replied reflexively.

“He is also very lucky to have you as well,” Jackie said with a smile.

She saw Star smile widely as well. But then, for a split second, she looked conflicted once more, almost… guilty. There was something Jackie was missing. She had thought Star might have feelings for Marco, but her reaction was off if that was simply the case. Maybe she and Marco had already done something she thought she ought to be ashamed of?

But that couldn’t be. Marco hadn’t told Jackie anything that could have caused that, and the boy had the most transparent body language ever. He was literally too nervous to ever be capable of ‘cheating’. So there was something else, something that Jackie was plainly not seeing.

“The ducks will be fine!” explained the doctor, emerging through the back door, Marco walking all hunched up behind her. And with that, the conversation was over.

---

Jackie hadn’t had another opportunity to talk to Star about anything significant before they got to the concert. They had gotten along pretty well after that, and bonded over releasing the ducks back to the Echo Creek, well, creek. Star had the most funny stories about the place, and Jackie had to wonder if even half of it was for real. Magic or no magic, Star’s stories sounded too incredible to be fully true.

Oddly enough, it was Marco who had felt a bit left out there. Jackie was sure that was at least in
part because he was bummed over the accident with the ducks. Well, as always, plenty of reassurance did the job. As well as an impromptu group hug instigated by Star.

Now they were finally there, sitting down as the stage lit for their favorite band. Marco was excited like a little kid in a candy shop, and Jackie couldn’t take her eyes of him while he fanboyed about the teen band. Hell, the boys on the stage were the kind of guy Jackie daydreamed about just a year or so ago, and now she was paying more attention to the ‘Safe Kid’ sitting beside her. Not that Justin Towers wasn’t dreamy, but well, he had nothing on her Marco.

Her favorite song started and she took her boyfriend by the hand, picking him up to start dancing. “Whoo! Dance with me, Diaz!”

She didn’t quite notice when Star grabbed Marco’s hand. Or had it been the other way around? But somehow the three of them where soon bouncing to the rhythm. It was a bit weird, but not in a bad way. Then Marco turned away from her, and he and Star began lip syncing to the lyrics.

“It was no secret,” Marco began.

“The way that we feel,” Star continued.

“A love that’s so pure.”

“A love that’s so real.”

Jackie arched an eyebrow in surprise, but they weren’t looking at her, and she wasn’t about to interrupt them. Sure, the song was ostensibly, if only barely so, about friendship. But it was also about falling in love, romantic love, with your best friend, or at least that’s how Jackie had always interpreted it. Despite Marco’s protests, he and Star had a very strong kind of chemistry, one that didn’t exactly spell friends. You needed to be blind not to see it, and Jackie always considered herself fairly good at observing people.

“You showed me your world and it felt like a sign.”

Star had taken Marco outside of Earth, into other dimensions. Of course, she had also taken the whole school once, but she took him there every week. What had she shown him? And, wasn’t Marco showing Star Earth too?

“But you acted too slow and you ran out of ti-ii-me.”

Jackie’s eyes went wide. Did Marco not realize what he was saying? If Star did have a crush on him, even if he did not, then that was almost cruel. But the mewman didn’t seem to mind one bit.

“And now we’ll be…” they both sang as the reached the chorus.

“Just friends”

“We will be”

“Just friends”

Jackie wasn’t sure what to feel. She held on to Marco’s hand, but he wasn’t there, not really. He and Star seemed to be in their own world and she was watching from the outside, moving to the beat. It was so strange.

“And now we’ll be”
“Just friends”

Maybe they were. Maybe that was all. But, even as friends, there was something between the two of them inside of which Jackie would never be able to enter, whether she accompanied them adventuring or not. A closeness to their relationship that wasn’t there for herself and Marco, even at their most intimate.

“Be just friends”

It was scary. No, it was terrifying.

Jackie didn’t feel jealous about Star. She couldn’t. Marco was amazing, but yet she herself had only started noticing him this year, and, the reason she had noticed him, was Star. Star made Marco a different person, a more confident, happier, braver person. So, whatever they had, Jackie would never wish to take it from them. In a way, she wanted them to have more of it. But, she was also afraid. She was afraid that one day Marco would realize he had something with Star that was more important than what he had with her, that he would change his mind about what he had said two weeks earlier.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” Star sang.

Then don’t, Jackie thought, please don’t.

“You didn’t have a clue,” Marco continued.

You both are clueless!

“So you went out and got busy,” Star retorted.

Jackie’s face flushed slightly. Maybe she was reading too much into the lyrics, but still, that was one way to put it.


They seemed to go closer and closer as they sang that last line, almost as if they were about to turn to each other and kiss. This was too much. She had wanted to have a look into their… well, friendship, maybe? And is not that she didn’t like what she saw, not exactly. But, this was too much, too early.

“And now we’ll be”

“Just friends”

Jackie pulled Marco towards her. Sweat running through her hands. She was chickening out. She had prodded Marco about liking Star, and Star about liking Marco. They both had denied it, while she had secretly hoped for confirmation. But now, now she wasn’t sure that was what she wanted.

“Oh we will be, just friends”

Marco was dancing with her now. Star had let him go without any trouble. She still held Marco’s hand too, but like Jackie before, she was leaving the two of them alone and dancing on her own.

Jackie’s heart was hammering in her chest, she didn’t let it show. She needed to reassure herself that Marco was hers, that he did love her. Right now, them singing the same song he had just sung with Star, Jackie’s favorite song, wasn’t enough. She felt the guitar solo start, and pulled Marco
towards her. She put a hand on his chest, and kissed him. She needed reassurance.

Her lips pressed against Marco’s, the heat of his skin was soothing. She had half expected Marco to be annoyed when she pulled him away from Star, or for his mind not to be on the kiss. But it was. It felt just like when they were alone. It was not their most passionate kiss, but it was a caring, loving one. Jackie felt her worries melt away, and closed her eyes.

“Wow,” Marco said when their lips finally separated. They both gazed lovingly into each other’s eyes for a split of a second, and then... “Star?”

Star had gone away, and Marco ran after her. Strangely, Jackie was ok with it. She no longer felt worried about her boyfriend chasing down the stairs after his best friend. She considered following too. But then she realized why Star had gone away. Jackie felt guilty, very guilty.

This wasn’t the plan, Star and Marco had both invited her, and at best she had just made Star uncomfortable, and at worst, well, at worst the princess did have feelings for Marco, and Jackie had just rubbed salt on the wound. Not only that, she had done so just to reassure herself over the two of them singing a song together about simply being friends. Shit. Way to mess it up Lynn Thomas!

The last thing she wanted was for Star to hate her, or for them to stop hanging out all three together. Or, even worse, to cause a fight between Marco and Star. Jackie liked what the two of them had, she truly did. She had thought she could handle it even if the two friends had been in love, and yet she had felt overwhelmed by a freaking dance routine. So much for keeping her cool.

She saw the two of them talking. Star was smiling, she was pushing Marco to go back up. What would Jackie do when Marco came up? She could always play it as being clueless. Marco would just make some excuse for Star, and Jackie would pretend to believe them. She would also pretend that she had only kissed him because she was at a concert with her boyfriend and ‘it just happened’.

Meanwhile, Star was walking towards the exit now, removing herself from her own plans so that Jackie and Marco could be alone. Star was definitely a better person than she was, and Jackie never felt so small in her life.

----

Star was trying her best not to cry, bottling up her frustration and the turmoil of jealousy within her. It was just a freaking kiss! Nothing at all when compared to what she had seen a few weeks before through the Seeing Eye spell. But it had been right in front of her, right while holding her hand.

Well, what did she expect? She had arranged this whole thing, as an apology to Marco and Jackie. What, had she supposed that her bestie wouldn’t want to kiss his date at a romantic pop music concert? Hell, she had almost tried to kiss Marco herself! She avoided it by her last thread of self-control, actually, and she then had the audacity to get shocked when his actual girlfriend kissed him?

But the emotions raging through her were not rational. Star hurt, badly. She wanted Marco, and for a few minutes she had felt that the entire world was only the two of them. He had given her his hand, he had sung with her. Why couldn’t he just have ignored her from the moment the song started playing!?

She lifted her wand, and let her fury and regret flow through it, visceral, uncaring for all his reasons and all her mistakes. A blast of green energy flew out from the tip of the cleaved wand, and the promotional sign for the concert went up in a fiery explosion.
It would have been less painful if Marco Diaz had meant to hurt her. The fact that he had still cared enough to leave his date to try to make sure Star was ok somehow made it worse. If instead of her caring but clueless friend, Marco had just behaved like a straight up asshole, he would never have been able to wound her half as deeply!

“Wow, Starship. And they say I have anger issues…” Speak of the devil, literally.

“Fuck off, Tom!”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, hey Tom...

Also, hope you all didn't all miss the smut too badly ;)
What are Fiends for?

Chapter Summary

In which the devil gets its due, the princess surrenders her wand, and a small mistake makes nobody happy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5: What are Fiends for?

**Continuity stardate:** This chapter takes place immediately after the last one, meaning the night following the SvtFoE episode “Just Friends” (S02E20b). This story so far is considered compatible with SvtFoE season 2 events up to that point.

“Fuck off, Tom!” she growled at him.

The three-eyed demon had just emerged from the concert arena, right behind Star. With little more than a thought, he dismissed the glamour that disguised him as a normal human teen and continued walking towards her. He knew this was a bad idea, particularly after their last meeting, but something seemed seriously off with Star. He had to know what was going on.

She, however, didn’t seem particularly appreciative of his concern. “When are you going to stop stalking me?!”

“Stalking you?! I am not...”

Tom hadn’t actually come to the concert to keep tabs on Star. In fact, he had been surprised to notice her as she ran down the stairs in the middle of the first song of the night. He had seen her stop right in front of the stage. He had seen Marco go after her. He had seen them hug and him go back up alone. Tom had noticed that Star had seemed, well, strange, even after their hug, and decided to follow. Even he had failed to realize just how distressed Star truly was, until he watched her hex the sign to pieces.

So, well, he was honestly looking out for her wellbeing here, and she responded by accusing him of following her around!? How dare she!

Tom felt the anger flare up and counted to ten in his head. It was almost a reflex nowadays, the year with Brian had helped him sense when he was getting angry and stop himself momentarily, until he could think properly. If only Star gave him even a little credit for that!

Oh well, it wasn’t like he hadn’t given her plenty of reasons to expect the worst from him. Now that he thought about it, better that Star believe that he was following her, it was easier to explain in any case.

“I mean, I am not ‘stalking’ anyone, just, you know, keeping a friendly eye on you. Why else
would I be at a Love Sentence concert, right?” he lied, chuckling nervously. “But hey, it is a good thing that I did, Starship, because you look like you could use someone to talk to…”

“Not really in a talking mood, Tom,” Star said coldly. She began walking fast away from the stadium. The demon boy followed a few meters behind her, cautiously. “Not in a mood for you at all. Never am, now that I think about it.”

She didn’t sound like Star. There was no energy behind her words, no enthusiasm and no indignation, just dispassionate annoyance. True, Star usually rejected his advances, often with far more emphatic denials. But this was different.

Frankly, when he first saw how sad she had looked, Tom had considered testing his luck again. You know, trying to comfort the princess with a shoulder rub, and just take it from there. It wasn’t just him being selfish either, he truly thought he could maybe find a way to make both of them happier.

There was a sharpness to her tone, however, that told him that would not, in fact, be a good idea.

“Star, no tricks, no schemes. I am honestly worried about you. This doesn’t sound like you,” Tom tried, fully aware that he didn’t sound like himself either.

The truth was that he did care. Maybe his love for Star was a selfish one, but it was still love. He wanted her to be alright, to snap out of this coldness. This was not the Mewnian princess he knew and coveted.

“What, no speech about how I am terrible and should be with you because we are both garbage?” Star retorted, picking up the pace. “Because, you know, that’s the way to charm a girl… ‘you are evil, I am evil, let’s make babies!’” she shouted, her previous indifference quickly replaced by fury, and yet the ice in her words remained.

Normally, that kind of tone, coming from anyone, would have caused the underworld prince to incinerate the foolhardy mortal who even dared speak to him like that. Under the circumstances, however, it didn’t even occur to Tom that he should be mad. He was just worried. It was just so unsettling to see her like this. So much that even Tom didn’t dare making this about himself.

Star had never been this angry. Even when they broke up she had been… well, she had avoided him for a while and then simply told him she couldn’t keep dealing with his angry outbursts. But she had never before intentionally used her words like that to hurt him, even when he himself did it to her. Now Tom almost expected to see flames coming out around the princess instead.

“Starship, I am really sorry about that, I never really meant what I said that night. You once had a thing for bad boys, and I just thought…”

Tom was not used to being the gentle one. Star was impulsive, and she could be very direct, but she had never been mean. Sure, a few times in the past he had had to apologize to her and got immediately punched for it, but she usually got her anger out of her system with just one, usually symbolic, punch.

Wait, that was it!

“If you want to take out your anger on me a bit, I can deal, Star. You are probably right, I deserve it.”

Star looked back at him, a murderous glare in her eyes. Tom did not know that glare. Toffee and his monsters had seen it once, right before Star freed Marco from a certain glass prison. But for
Tom, it was new, and it scared him. Tom, who had seen that which lay below the foundations of the world, who had spoken face to face with the archangel of death himself, who had called upon the names of the unnamable, shuddered at seeing that expression on the face of Star Butterfly. She turned around again and continued briskly walking away. He followed in silence for what seemed like hours, but could have been just five minutes.

“You know, Tom, I am not angry at you.”

There was a short pause. The demon prince did not dare say a word, he just waited for her to continue.

“Well, no, let me rephrase that: I am angry at you. But this particular anger is not about you.” She spoke slowly, frozen words, and a voice as sharp as steel. “I am not mad at Marco or Jackie either. It really is not their fault. This is about me. I am angry at myself. For feeling this way, for not being able to be happy for my friend. For doing things I never should have, and for wanting to do even worse things. So, maybe you are right and Janna is wrong, maybe I am indeed a bad person.”

“Star, that was me lying to you. You know what I was trying to do? Right?” Tom decided that coming clean on it would be better than having to see Star like this. “It was just me guilt-tripping you to get back together, just like you said. You are not a bad person. Come on, I’ll prove it to you! If you truly are bad, then why aren’t you taking your anger out on me? It would be easy. Just blast me until you feel better or something! I would do it to you in an instant, you know that!”

That was a lie, he would do it to anyone else, for sure, but not to Star.

“And, you think I won’t?” Star asked, surprised.

Was she surprised at him, at what he was saying? Or was she surprised about herself, that she would not hurt him? Or, maybe, Tom realized, she was surprised that she was considering doing what he had suggested. Well, either way, if that snapped her from this state, it was well worth it.

“I know you won’t.” Tom lied.

Star turned around, fast as lightning. Perhaps she feared she wouldn’t go through with it if she thought it through for more than an instant. She pointed her wand straight at Tom’s chest. She narrowed her eyes and in a moment they glowed bright emerald. Her cheekmarks shone as well, in the same unearthly hue. A huge spiraling blast of green and black left the wand and hit him squarely in the chest. He made no effort to block it or avoid it.

Incredible pain shot through his body. This was nothing like being encased in ice or having his hand chopped off. It was probably not like getting blasted by narwhals or trampled by warnicorns either. Star’s spells were brutal, but when she cast those, she mostly meant to win a fight. Causing harm was only the necessary side-effect. Right now, though, she had meant to hurt him and, largely, she had succeeded.

Maybe she had even meant to kill him. It certainly felt that way. It was like being struck by lightning and, immediately after that, having your blood freeze and your skin turn to acid. He felt his nerves overload with agony. He felt his consciousness fade.

----

Tom Lucitor opened his three eyes slowly. His body hurt all over. It hadn’t hurt like this in a very long time. He saw the stone arch above him. Was he back in the underworld? No way! No, he was under a bridge. A small river flowed in front of him. He looked to his left. Star was there, sitting on
her knees, eyes looking down, tears flowing from them. “S... Starship?”

“Tom! I am so so sorry! I don’t know what came over me! I didn’t mean to do that, not really.” The demon prince knew that was a lie. You simply could not cast dark magic like that and not mean it.

But he was not about to tell Star that right now. Besides, he realized, he had deserved it. He had tried manipulating Star time and time again. He had tried to get their souls bonded under the Blood Moon without her knowledge. He had once kidnapped and almost killed her best friend. In a way, it felt cathartic to feel that kind of anger and hate coming from her, a long awaited punishment.

“Star, no biggy. You needed to let that kind of anger out on someone. That’s not the kind of hurt you want bottled inside of you. Believe me, I would know. Besides, I am not exactly fragile, and you knew that. I was the obvious target.” Tom shrugged, then winced in pain from the effort. “How long was I out, though?”

“Well... no more than three or four…” Star looked to the sky nervously, then at her phone, “... hours.”

What? Four hours?! What kind of a spell had that been? Tom’s eyes glowed red in annoyance, but the searing pain that shot through as his muscles tensed snapped him out of yet another ‘episode’. “You... you are a lot stronger than I remember, Starship.”

”Sorry,” Star repeated, genuinely apologetic. She extended her hand and touched Tom’s chin, who flinched in response. Her eyes looked into his own with a worried expression. Star’s eyes were puffy and red with crying. Over Marco? Or over him? “I would have tried to heal you, but I have never been able to do healing magic right.”

“It doesn’t matter, Starship. I heal fast,” he assured her.

It was true. If he was awake, then it meant that his internal organs had finished regrowing where needed, and mayor broken bones had mended. The rest should be a matter of minutes, really. In any case, no amount of physical damage could end him permanently. Tom was, for most intents and purposes, immortal.

That said, that sort of thing did come with caveats he did not care to fully test.

“Would you tell me now what has you so down? You owe me at least that... no, sorry, old habits, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want,” he corrected himself. He was being truthful. He also realized that if he were trying to guilt trip someone, he could have hardly done better than that.

“Well, we three were at the concert together and... Marco and Jackie kissed…” Star answered. “That... um, that was it, pretty much, really.”

They both blinked. Tom began laughing, his ribs ached like, well, like home, but he couldn’t help it. He laughed a thunderous laugh. After a few moments of surprise and confusion, Star joined him.

“But you saw them have sex before!”

“Saw it? I felt it! I have seen Marco kiss every inch of Jackie Lynn Thomas with a shit eating grin on his face!”

“And you went all Queen of Darkness over a peck on the lips?”

“Yeah... well, it was a bit more than a peck, but still, yeah, just a kiss at a concert! A concert to
which I invited the two of them in the first place. Well... except she didn’t know it was me, I think. She thinks it was Marco’s idea!”

“Marco’s idea? Starship, he is a great guy and all, but he couldn’t plan a romantic date to save his life. This Jackie girl obviously knows what’s going on!”

“And what is going on? Besides me totally being an idiot, I mean?”

“I mean, clearly, that you were trying to get her jealous when she saw how much Marco and you act like a couple!” It made perfect sense to him.

“Wait? What?! No. Marco and I don’t act like a couple!” Star looked at Tom in surprise.

He grinned at her. Oh my, could it be that Star really hadn’t planned it like that? It was what he would do, if he were in her position. Well, in her position and able to keep his temper in check long enough. Go to the date as the third wheel, make ambiguous moves on the crush the whole night, wait for the girlfriend to get jealous, then play innocent and try to convince the boy that his date was being a bitch over nothing. It was, well, not quite the oldest trick in the book, but right up there.

Star still looked dumbfounded. “So… so that’s why Jackie pulled him over and kissed him? Because she thought I was making moves on him?”

“That’s actually a pretty good block on her part,” Tom noted. “But, honestly, I don’t know. Depends on what was actually happening there. So, you really were not planning anything of the sort?”

“No! No way! I would never do that!” Star looked at him first confused, then thoughtfully. “Do you think it would have worked?”

Tom shrugged, then smirked at Star. She seemed to be looking at him in a different way. She had stopped crying a while ago, and seemed, a bit nervous. Sometimes, her gaze was avoiding his even when looking in his direction.

At first, the demon was just confused, even if he didn’t exactly find the attention unpleasant. Then, Tom looked down and saw, first his torso, then his stomach and lack-of-bellybutton, then his...

“Star! I am naked! Why am I naked? How long have I…”

Tom realized that Star hadn’t been avoiding his gaze. She had been sneaking a peek! Multiple peeks, actually. What the hell? Now she was into him?

“Sorry! Your clothes kinda, sort of, maybe... got destroyed in the blast,” she looked up and away, but Tom saw her cheeks brighten just a little.

“Starship, if you want to look, then look,” Tom goaded her.

He had no plan, no strategy. No scheme of his called for him to be naked and bruised under a bridge while Star chatted about her crush on the human boy to him. But you played the hand you were dealt, and he did not intend to be bashful little Marco about the whole situation. He was sure Star had been looking before.

She turned slowly again and began staring at him, shamelessly. He smiled at her, lifted his arms to the back of his head and spread his legs further apart. “Like what you see?”
“Yeah…” Star blanked. “No. Wait. I like Marco, and you and I broke up!”

“Well, Marco is not here, Starship. Actually, you said three or four hours, right?” Tom smiled at her maliciously. He didn’t have a great hand, but he had one good card to play. “Bet you anything you care to name, right now Marco and Jackie are back from the concert, having all kinds of fun. Together. Alone.”

Star seemed to get a bit sad again hearing that. Tom, however, wasn’t done.

“We two are here now, though. Together. Alone.” He faked thinking out the matter for a moment. “As for us breaking up… I did not ask you to date me again, Starship. I only asked if you like what you see.”

The Mewman princess blushed deep crimson, her cheekmarks glowing like tiny stars in the night. “Well… I…”

“So…” Tom suggested casually, “How about we have some fun? I already helped relieve your anger. Perhaps I can give you other kinds of relief as well?”

“Ok,” Star relented.

No, that was not correct; she had agreed to his proposal, no hesitation, and no tricks needed. Well, not yet.

“With one condition!” she added. Tom arched two eyebrows. “Don’t call me Starship!”

“Fine!” Tom said, slightly annoyed at her vetoing his favorite pet name for her. “But I have one condition of my own: Say that you want me!”

----

Star felt surprised to hear the demon’s demand. Why ask her to say that, when she had already agreed to sleep with him? Oh, dammit, her mind was just now catching up to her mouth as she realized she had indeed agreed to sleeping with Tom. It was one thing to imagine it when gossiping with her friend, or alone in her room after that super confusing night the other time, but this was different, this was happening for real.

Her blush expanded through her face as she replied. “Tom… I want you!”

She wasn’t lying either, Star realized. Maybe having admitted that to Janna before made it easier to admit it to Tom, and to herself. He was hot, after all, and she didn’t mean it just in the literal, fire and brimstone, sense either. Star had just been admiring his well defined chest and abs in that deliciously slender body of smooth purple skin. She had stolen many glances at his cock, semi-erect and shamelessly displayed for her gaze.

He smirked at her and made no effort to conceal himself, his eyes looking directly at her face, narrowing ever so slightly, bright with a mysterious emotion, opaque windows to an inscrutable soul. Tom was enigmatic, and he was dangerous. It was the reason Star had dated him in the first place and the reason they had stopped being together as well. It was also the reason she still felt attracted to him, despite it all, despite how bad he was for her, or how bad they were together.

He slowly got up, leaning against the wall of the tunnel for support, keeping his clawed hand under Star’s chin, pushing her to stand up as well. She felt the need to say something, before the inevitable. “Just to be clear, Tom. This is not about getting back together, and it’s not about liking you.”
Tom smiled at her, a sharp grin full of sharper fangs, “Starsh... I mean, Star. I am a demon. Do you think you have to explain these things to me?”

His hand pressed against her chest for only a second. She felt a nipple harden against the fabric. Then Tom drew his hand away, extended two fingers and poked at Star’s shirt. She didn’t feel the claws touch her, but saw them go into the shirt. They burned two fiery holes on her custom concert tee, erasing the faces of Marco Diaz and Jackie Lynn Thomas.

“This is about frustration. It is about getting even,” Tom remarked. “I can help you with that.”

He drew nearer, breathing on her neck, his hot naked body pressing against her still clothed self. ‘Still’? Star realized how much she was treating what was to come as a foregone conclusion now. She felt Tom’s heat envelop her, his inhuman yet not at all unpleasant heat. Star hadn’t quite noticed how cold the night air had been just a moment before, even in the California summer, or how much it bothered her.

He whispered in her ear, “But I need this to also be about desire, Star. To be about need. I don’t need you to love me, or even to like me, just to want me.”

She blushed, and nodded. It was strange how much Tom had her figured out, when he was not blinded by a fit of rage. It was indeed about all those things.

Tom had just reminded her a moment ago that Marco and Jackie were probably together now, doing something like this. She could feel in her heart that he was right. She needed someone tonight, she just couldn’t stand to be alone while the boy she loved was with another girl. If she could have Marco, then she would have never agreed to being with Tom. But she couldn’t. Marco was with Jackie. Tom was here, with her.

She pushed her head backwards slightly, until she felt the demon prince’s breath slide away from her neck. Then she moved forward again, stood on her toes, and hungrily kissed Tom against the wall. He grunted and winced as his shoulders impacted the stone, but still pushed himself forward as well, kissing back.

She pressed herself against him, eager to feel the heat. She parted her lips and felt his tongue go into her mouth, playfully fighting her own, pushing and retreating, dancing and fighting. She felt hands against her back, a comforting embrace. Then claws danced down her back, ripping her white concert tee to shreds. She pushed back slowly and felt the pieces fall to the ground.

“Sorry about that, Star. I hope you didn’t want to keep that one?” Tom said in a serious tone. A smug smirk belied the insincerity of his apology.

“No, I didn’t.” Star replied, understanding the symbolism in the gesture, “and I have a skateboard you can incinerate later, too.” Maybe ‘later’ she would change her mind, but right now she wanted nothing from Jackie. “Let me take off the rest myself, though. I don’t think I want to walk home from here naked.”

Tom’s eyes went wide for a moment, then he laughed. “Star, we both know you could magic up some clothes afterwards. But that is quite the mental image.”

Star looked down at Tom’s hard-on and smiled. She wondered if that was her words or the kiss.

“Well, I still like these clothes.” She was wearing a light blue dress and tights, not quite her favorite outfit, but also not one she wanted to go up in flames.

“Ok, Star. Then do that. Undress for me!” Tom commanded her more than asked her, leaning
against the wall once more.

Star felt herself go red with embarrassment. She thought back to the night she had seen Marco and Jackie do this. She remembered how confident the skateboarder girl had been when undressing for Marco and wondered if she could even put up such a display for Tom, or for anyone else. Was Jackie undressing for Marco right now? Sliding the concert tee Star made and her own green and white top off her head with a swift self assured movement? Star imagined she was. She could imagine it very vividly. It made her blood boil.

She pushed her boots off from her feet, and forcefully yanked the dress above her head, throwing it to the concrete floor. She knew it hadn’t been graceful or sexy, but Tom didn’t seem to mind, he was looking hungrily at her chest. Star could only wonder if right now Marco was looking at his girlfriend’s much larger breasts with a similar expression. She knew he was. She could almost see it.

“Star, you are beautiful…” Tom began.

She raised a hand, cutting him off. That was not the kind of words she wanted now, not from Tom at least. She pulled down her tights until she was standing in front of her ex-boyfriend in only a pair of cotton panties with a golden star in the middle. Tom seemed to regard her expression for a moment, then he smiled and switched gears.

“Ok, Star. So you are now naked, outside, at night, under a bridge, with a naughty, evil, demon,” he pushed himself up from the wall with both hands and advanced towards her. His eyes fixed on her chest, small flames dancing on his claws. “What exactly is that you said you wanted?”

“You,” Star said, trying to put all her conviction in her voice. She knew her cheekmarks were literally glowing now, with both embarrassment and anticipation.

She let Tom advance on her. She let him grab her by the hands and guide her back to the wall. Except this time, he pinned her against it, holding her arms above her head. She held on to her wand. She could feel the cold concrete on her back, but also the warmth from Tom’s body pressing against her from the front. She felt his kisses on her neck, then light bites, then a painful but exciting sucking sensation on the right side.

“Star, put the wand on the floor,” Tom said as he let her go. She hesitated for a moment. Tom grinned at her. “What, you mean you don’t trust me?”

Star felt cold as Tom retreated two steps back, giving her space to kneel down and deposit her wand safely on the ground, carefully setting it away from both of them and from the creek which passed under the bridge. She did as he wanted.

“No. I don’t,” she replied as she walked back to the wall were she had been just moments before and raised her arms above her head. She grinned at Tom. “I don’t trust you one bit.”

The demon walked towards her again and once more closed his claws around Star’s wrists, holding her in place.

“You know, Star? Without that wand of yours you are entirely at my mercy. I can do to you right now. Whatever. I. Want.” he whispered in her ear.

It was not true, Star knew. She could always dip down if she really needed to, and overpower Tom with or without the wand. Yet, for some reason, being at Tom’s mercy, at least for now, was a strangely exciting thought for her.
It helped that what he wanted to do to her seemed to be to slowly kiss down her collarbone until reaching her chest. Tom’s tongue was hot and soft and it felt incredible as it started tracing little flicks on her small mounds, making her wait in agony for those moments when it quickly darted for her hard nipples, before retreating again to explore the flesh around it. Soon those touches became more frequent and, moments after, she felt the unearthly warmth of the demon’s breath as he easily took her right breast into his mouth and began sucking on it, swirling his tongue around its center. Star opened her mouth and a loud moan escaped into the silent night.

Were Marco and Jackie also doing this right now? Star was sure they were. She could practically see them in Jackie’s bed, his face buried in the other girl’s far more developed rack. She shook her head. Then she had an idea. Star closed her eyes. She begun to imagine that the kisses in her chest came from Marco, that the tongue around her nipple was Marco’s. She moaned once again. She had already been hot and bothered, but for some reason, imagining Tom as Marco made it even more intense. She felt her wetness spread through the cotton panties.

A hand went into her underwear and a finger began cautiously exploring her entrance. Marco’s finger, she thought, lying to herself. She opened her legs and lowered herself slightly on the wall to give him better access. She felt a finger go in and out a few times, then arch up, touching something inside her that made her whimper. She felt her strength leave her legs and opened her eyes in surprise. She saw Tom, not Marco, grinning at her, holding her up with just one hand. She blushed hard.

Tom drew his other hand up to show it to the princess. She hadn’t even noticed when he let go of her left arm. Tom’s fingers were drenched in her juices. He lifted them up to his mouth and licked them clean.

“You taste so sweet... and innocent.” Tom smiled malevolently.

“Hey, you take that back!” Star retorted, in mock offense. She lowered her now free hand and closed it around the demon’s cock. She pumped him up and down a couple of times. “Still think I am innocent?”

“Y... yes. Yes, I do,” Tom replied hoarsely. He raised two eyebrows. “Do you want to prove me wrong a second time today?”

“Of course I do.” Star smiled, with a mixture of genuine interest and feigned confidence.

“Then, Star...” Tom smiled at her, a nasty yet hopeful smile, “... get on your knees.”

Star blinked for a moment, not understanding. Then, a second later, she got it.

She looked around nervously. She ought to have expected this, of course, but, then again, she had never done that before. Ok, once in a dream. But dreams were weird, and it had felt different, like she always knew what to do there. Was she really trying that, for the first time, with Tom? Then she saw it, a small wooden box two meters or so from where they were.

“Oh, Tom. You got it. But you have to sit... there!” she pointed at the box.

Tom looked at her with a puzzled expression, but he let her go and, without further question, proceeded to sit down on the wooden crate. He smirked at her, daring her to come to him. Star was pretty sure that was the same box Marco had been sitting on earlier on the day, when the three of them had come to release the ducks. Which meant this was the same bridge.

It was perfect.
She walked up to the front of the box, she knelt on the cold cement in front of it. She opened her mouth, she thought of what she had seen Jackie do a few weeks ago, and about what she herself had dreamed doing. She imagined doing this to Marco.

Star was taking her best friend’s penis in her mouth, or at least half of it. She tried pushing her lips further down, but failed. Instead, she began running her tongue over the head. Then going up and down, lubricating it with her saliva. Slowly, she found that she could take more and more of it without gagging. She pushed her lips further together and alternated moving her tongue around and flicking it below the member. She imagined herself doing this for Marco. She wanted to do well for him, to have him enjoy it. She wanted to be better at this than Jackie.

Why was she still thinking of Jackie? She could imagine the two of them, though, in vivid Technicolor in her mind: Jackie Lynn Thomas expertly sucking Marco’s dick as he laid in her bed and the boy squirming in pleasure under her ministrations. It wasn’t fair!

Star felt two hands push her head against Marco’s lap, fixing her in place. She kept doing what she was doing, thinking only of making her bestie feel as good as possible. Ignoring the voice in the back of his mind that reminded her where or with whom she was. She could hear her best friend grunt and moan with satisfaction, see his expression of pleasure. Watch him tense up with the inevitable approaching climax, and explode completely... in Jackie’s mouth. She saw the cool girl give Marco a satisfied grin and swallow. Star hated that grin! Then she felt something flood her own mouth, something bitter and thick that dribbled down the corner of her lips.

She heard Tom’s voice, “Whoa, Star. Not bad for the first time!” A claw ran along her chin. “Now, now, Star, don’t waste it. Swallow properly. You wanted to prove you are not too innocent, right?”

Star felt annoyed, and sad. But it mostly wasn’t Tom’s fault. She did as asked and quickly gulped down the demon’s cum. She felt it, warm and sticky, going down her throat. It honestly wasn’t that bad of an experience, but it certainly wasn’t an enjoyable one either.

There was something wrong with her imagination. She had meant to imagine Tom as Marco, which, ok, wasn’t really the kindest thing to do to the boy currently with her, but, well, that wasn’t the issue. The question was why Jackie kept popping in her head as well, and why it all seemed so, so real? Sure, Star’s imagination was pretty good at painting vivid pictures, but this was something else. She could had sworn she had seen Jackie blowing Marco. She had felt it too, sort of. In a weird way she had felt his pleasure. Not like she was orgasming too when he did, well, when his fantasy of Marco did, but she knew exactly how he had felt.

“Well, well, I stand corrected,” Tom said, looking down at Star with a pleased expression.

Wait, what was he talking about? Oh, right, their whole ‘innocent’ thing, their obvious game of chicken. Ok, Star, focus, you are with Tom now. He is no Marco, but imagining otherwise is just turning up super confusing anyways, and even less fun. So let’s stop fantasizing, ok?

“You should have let me known you were about to do that!” Star said, honestly a bit bothered, if not very surprised.

Tom shrugged unapologetically, then began running his hands along her face, arms and breasts. It felt good, not really that strong sexually, but soothing. She felt and saw traces of flames linger wherever the demon touched. Two hands went under her armpits and tried to pull her up. Tom grunted and gave up.

“Star. Climb on me, please,” Tom asked.
Not seeing why not, Star complied, removing her underwear before straddling the demon boy. She was soon sitting on his lap, facing him. Tom started kissing her again. Apparently the prince of the underworld didn’t care what had been in her mouth before either. He reached back with his hands and Star felt a surge of pain and pleasure shoot through her. It started near her shoulders, teasing her wings, and surged back towards her lower back, caressing her backside, going under her to lap her folds. She knew she was enveloped in fire, and that the fire was caressing her skin, all of it, and her insides. It did so gently, but it was still fire. It could not but hurt, but it did not harm her, and with the light pain, it also brought heat and pressure, and gratification.

Star lost track of time as she let Tom’s magics pleasure her. It was not as intense as even his fingers had been, not in any given point of her body, whether inside or outside. But it was pervasive and constant, and slowly bringing her higher and higher. When he was done, she could barely think straight. Tom, Marco, it didn’t matter, she needed someone. She needed someone in her, right now!

“So, what did you say you want?” Tom asked, almost mocking her.

She only grunted in response, but he seemed not to mind. He lifted her with some visible effort and slid himself under her. Star felt something press inside her crotch, she parted her legs to give it access. Barely aware that, as it pertained to a real, flesh and blood, boy, this was her first time.

It hurt, but only a little, only at first. Not that much more than the flames had hurt. Then she felt movement, and pleasure, and need. Tom pushed her up and down as he went in and out of her, without noticing, she began to push herself up and down as well, atop him. He grunted, shouted something she could not quite hear and pushed her down to the ground. His own body followed, inside of her. She impacted the pavement and she barely noticed. The crate broke and splintered under them and she barely noticed. Star withstood harder hits than that every other day in battle. The only thing she noticed was the emptiness in her when Tom withdrew from inside her, and the ecstasy as Marco entered her again.

She was seeing Marco again, not Tom. Feeling Marco inside her, like it should have been. She was happy. Her senses overwhelmed, her mind clouded. She saw his smile, his big brown eyes looking down at her, she smiled back. Jackie smiled back. Wait, what? Reality seemed to split then for Star, she was experiencing a single thing, but it was something that was happening in two places at once.

She was outside, under a bridge, naked on the cold concrete path, her back pushing pieces of wood as Tom fucked her with animal hunger, eyes glowing red with a feeling that was not anger but also, in some way, was. She did not hate that, it felt strong and raw and wild. It was exciting, it was transgressive, it was payback. She was also on a soft bed, hands caressing her, Marco’s mouth kissing her lips as he made love to her in a dim lit cozy room. Except there she was sometimes Star, and sometimes Jackie, and sometimes she was Marco too, feeling the warm bliss inside his lover’s body. She enjoyed that, it felt comforting, loving, intimate. It was beautiful, it was passionate, it was solace.


“Staar!” she heard Tom grunt, hungrily.

“Maaarco!” she heard Jackie moan, joyously.

“Staar!” she heard Marco shout, lovingly.
“Maaarco!” she heard herself cry out, wishfully.

Star opened her eyes. She was back outside, in the cold night, under the stone bridge, against the hard cement and broken wood. Three blood-red eyes glared at her with apocalyptic fury. She saw the fire flare up and sideways, blackening the stone of the arch, burning the remains of the crate and her discarded clothes. The flames lit up the night, they consumed everything around them, except for right around where she was lying down. She knew these were not caressing flames, these burned with rage and contempt. Tom was holding them back from her, and only barely so.

“Star... I had one request. Just one. Just for tonight,” Tom said with a forcefully restrained tone. That portion of his self-control didn’t last long. Soon, he was shouting, “Just. This. One. Time!”

The flames went from red, to orange, to yellow, and even though they remained far from Star, she could feel the searing heat. She eyed her wand, far away from her, too far to reach. She tried to dip down, but her mind was in turmoil. She could not summon all of herself, not now, not after what had just happened.

“What did you said you wanted?!” Tom asked.

She could feel the indignation, but also the pain, in his voice. She couldn’t answer.

“Who did you say you wanted?!”

No answer.

“Just for tonight! Just this once! I let you take your anger on me! I offered relief! I did everything to please you! Was it too much to ask for you to be mine for just a few moments!?”

Star closed her eyes. Normally she would have at least tried to kick him off of her, to defend herself, but she felt exhausted. She waited for the flames to burn. They never did. She opened her eyes moments later, to see Tom limping away from her, getting away on the far side of the tunnel.

Wait, limping? Was he still hurt from her spell? Had he been hurt the entire time? Had he done, all of what they did, while in pain?

Star scrambled to her feet and ran to grab her wand. She thought of going after Tom.

To do what? Apologize? ‘Hey, sorry I shouted Marco’s name when we had sex, hope you don’t mind, since you are in love with me and all’ Yeah, right...

She felt the night air around her. When did California get this cold?

The only warmth she felt, came from something fiery and sticky, running down her leg.

----

“Staar!” she heard Marco shout, lovingly. It hit her like a punch to the gut.

“Marco?” Jackie asked. She felt surprise and hurt mix into her voice.

The weight of his body on top of her felt oppressive. Just a second ago it had been comforting and reassuring, now it was just heavy. She saw him blink twice, confused. Did he not realize what he had just said? In their most intimate moment together?

The girl felt her cool exterior crack. She could feel her eyes wetting, a tear sliding down her cheek. Jackie saw the horror of realization in Marco’s face as he pushed himself off her. He sat on his
knees on her bed, looking at her, unsure what to do. He lifted a hand to cover his mouth. It was much too late for that. She looked away from him, maybe facing her bedroom wall would make this conversation easier.

“Marco, we need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

I think Earth is a pretty gre-at place.
That's saying something, 'cause I've been through outer space.
I think it suits me, it's just my style.
I think I'm gonna stay a little while.
... ;)


A Tale of two Set-ups

Chapter Summary

In which most things, but certainly not all, turn out according to plan, and Star and Marco spend a night together.

Chapter Notes

Be warned this is a long-ass chapter (no, not a long ass-chapter, you pervs!). It is almost half the size of the previous five chapters put together, which are already much longer than what I believe is the norm for this site. I considered breaking this up into 2 or even 3 chapters, but that would have meant not including a smut scene at all, and I remember how that went down the last time, so, well, long-ass chapter it is... enjoy ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 06: A Tale of two Set-ups

Continuity stardate: This chapter takes place the day after the SvtFoE episode “Just Friends” (S02E20b). At the end of this chapter, the story will have begun to diverge from the SvtFoE season 2 mainline in ways that have yet to be fully explained.

Tom counted to fifty in his mind. Then he counted to fifty again, and again. It didn’t matter, the inferno inside of him raged on. He had been mad with fury since he realized Star had been imagining herself with another. He had been ready to let his rage fall on her. To hurt her like she had hurt him.

Twice that day she had struck him. The first time it had been so painful he thought he would die, that he would cease to exist. It was an almost alien thought for one such as him. The second time had been so much worse. He felt like something in him had actually died that night. Yet he hadn’t been able to bring himself to make Star die with it as well.

The strange thing was, up to that point, up to that last second, that last cry, he had been happy. He had had Star, in the way he had wanted her for over a year, in the way he had pictured since so long ago. He had thought she wanted him. Maybe she did not love him. But, for a night, maybe she could want him. In that last moment, though, he realized he never had her, and she would never truly want him again, not even for an instant.

He dragged himself back to the now empty and dark stadium, to the parking lot where a carriage pulled by an undead horse awaited. He had all the time in the multiverse to process what had just happened. He would talk to Brian about it if need be. Although, right now, Tom couldn’t imagine himself saying a word of this to anyone, trained professional or not. For now, getting home was enough.
He opened the door and climbed inside the hearse-like vehicle, only to notice a stranger sitting in his favorite chair - his throne, if you will.

“So, how did your date with the princess go? Got any action?” a dark haired girl wearing a green beanie asked him casually. She looked him up and down. Tom realized he was still naked and growled in annoyance. “Right. Seems to me like you did. Good for you!”

“What are you doing inside my carriage? Get out of here, mortal fool, before I obliterate you!” Tom saw red. Flames lit the room as he made his threat. He was not in the mood for this crap.

The girl looked directly at him and blinked twice, very slowly, unimpressed.

“Janna,” she corrected him. “This mortal is named Janna, Prince Tom.”

How did she know who he was?

“I was just leaving anyway,” she shrugged. “But first, maybe I can tell you how I think your date went. Sounds good?”

Tom considered blasting her into the depths of the abyss for her insolence. But then, he realized, no one, not even he or Star, knew they were going to meet that night, and Star couldn’t have told this girl about their ‘date’ between the time it ended a few minutes ago and when he got here. There was something very strange going on.

“Star and I weren’t on a date, we ran into each other…” he observed, unsure why he felt like explaining that to the annoying trespasser.

“...at the Love Sentence concert. I know,” Janna interrupted him. “You attended the concert because you are secretly a huge fan of a certain Earth boy band, which is something you consider a dark shameful secret of sorts. There is a signed photo of yourself with Justin Towers in, well, probably that cabinet,” she pointed to it, accurately.

Tom glared at her. He wasn’t sure who this girl was or how she even knew that, but he hoped, for her sake, that she had a better reason for this little stunt than trying to blackmail him over his love of Love Sentence or something equally asinine. Once more, he was really not in the mood for this right now, and the girl seemed to be in no hurry to get to the point.

“So, you spotted Star as she was leaving the concert alone, looking dejected, and decided that it was your perfect chance to get into her royal knickers, if only you found a way to cheer her up. She told you she got beaten to her crush by another girl and you, selflessly, offered yourself as a replacement.” She laughed bitterly at that last part. “Surprising even you, she accepted without much prodding, and you two bumped uglies. Say, in a park somewhere?” Pause. “Except, when it was all over and done, she gently clarified to you your role as the rebound guy and told you, gently again, to get lost.”

She paused one final time and looked at him straight in the eyes. “How am I doing so far?”

“A little too well,” Tom replied.

His eyes narrowed in suspicion. Anger seemed to give way to puzzlement and the strange sensation that he had, somehow, been played. Only one way to find out for sure, though: keep the girl talking.

“But you are wrong on the last part,” he admitted. “We did not talk afterwards. She... she yelled Marco’s name as she... finished.”
Janna gave Tom a strange look, then seemed to be suppressing a laugh.

“Wow, that had to hurt!” she remarked. “There’s no accounting for taste, I guess. I mean, Marco is a fine boy and all, but going for that instead of well…” She looked him up and down again and licked her lips. “What is Star even thinking?”

Tom would never let it show, but the words soothed his wounded ego a little bit, even coming from a stranger. He noticed, for the first time, that said stranger was a fairly attractive human girl, of around Star’s age, which was also in her favor. Surely nothing special in the grand scheme of things, compared to the mewman princess, but attractive on a more simple - normal, was perhaps the word? - level. Unfortunately, she would not be around to compliment him much longer.

“Well, now that I have told you about that, I hope you do realize I have to kill you,” he mentioned casually. In fact, it was the only reason he had felt free to discuss his humiliation with the stranger. Dead girls only told tales when he wished them to do so.

“Sure, sure, you definitely could do that,” Janna replied calmly, seemingly not at all bothered by her imminent demise. “…or you could get back at Star.”

Get back at Star? Tom hadn’t realized how much he wanted that, until the strange girl brought it up. Yeah, she had hurt him twice that day. Granted, he had thought the first time actually made them square, balanced out what he had done to her in the past. But that also meant the second time was completely unjustified. Tom deserved revenge.

Well, it couldn’t hurt to hear what the girl was going to say, especially if he was going to incinerate her afterwards anyways. “How?”

“Mmm, dunno. Lots of options. If I were you I would simply try to make her jealous somehow, make her realize what she missed on, what she discarded,” Janna began, perilously prodding at his ego. “I mean, look at the facts. Evidence indicates she only notices the guys in her life after they are taken by someone else. Don’t tell me you don’t see that nifty pattern? Over half a year of ‘Marco and I are just friends’, then Jackie asks him out and suddenly Star wants the D...iay. Meanwhile, you are following after her like a lovesick puppy, and of course she feels you are worthless! It is a clichè so old the pharaohs probably complained about it!”

Tom reflected on her words. They sounded true. There was definitely a type of girl like that. But he didn’t think Star worked that way. Maybe he was wrong? Blinded by love, had he perhaps misjudged her?

“What you have to do, Tom, is find someone else. Preferably someone from Star’s life, so that she cannot forget you exist. The closer the better,” Janna continued, there was an almost hypnotic quality to the girl’s voice now.

“Hey, I know!” She conspicuously pretended to just figure something out. Tom had done that often enough to recognize when someone else was pulling that trick on him, still, he listened. “How about her best friend?”

“Marco?!” Tom asked, disgusted.

“Well, that would be hot,” Janna observed with a chuckle. “But I was thinking about her best girl friend.”

She made an obvious dramatic pause. Frankly, Tom thought she was laying it on far too thick, but he wouldn’t deny that she had kept him interested in what she had to say.
“Oh, what a coincidence, I just realized, Star’s best girl friend is, well... me.” The last word had sounded almost like a question, yet it conspicuously wasn’t one.

Tom’s eyes widened. So that was the girl’s game? Well, she was cute, and she might be fun for a date or two, especially if she could actually help him make Star even a bit jealous. Wait a second!

“If you are truly Star’s best friend, why would you help me make her jealous?” he asked.

“Maybe I find it fun. Maybe I am a bad friend. Maybe you are just that hot. Maybe I have ulterior motives I can’t yet tell you about,” she listed calmly, counting with her fingers. “One or more of those.”

“How do I know you really are a close friend of Star? She never mentioned you,” Tom retorted. He couldn’t believe he was considering this.

“Well, I knew about your night, didn’t I?” Janna explained like it was obvious, and the demon felt a bit slow to not have figured it out before. “Whom other than a close friend could have arranged all those happy coincidences?”

“Wait, what?! Arranged? You planned this?!” Tom’s eyes went red with rage once more. “Are you saying that you not only knew what happened, but knew it before it happened, because you planned it?!”

“Point Tom,” Janna replied, amused.

He again had to pause to wonder how much she knew, which was probably the whole point of making that obvious reference. On the other hand, it gave him time to count to ten in his head once more.

“But, how?” Tom honestly couldn’t conceive how anyone would know he was going to be at the concert, or predicted his interactions with Star this well.

“Mmmm... do you consider yourself a living soul, Tom?” she asked.

“Not really. Not exactly living. Plus, I don’t have the other thing either.” What kind of question was that, though? “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Then, maybe, one day I will explain it to you,” she winked at him.

“Wait, you are telling me, that you somehow contrived a scenario where Star would get her heart broken, run into me, decide to have a one night stand with me, and then completely and utterly humiliate me?!” Flames exploded out of every pore of his body. He saw the girl flinch, just a little bit. Ironically, that made him feel a bit more in control again.

Then he realized he was missing something: motive.

Sure, someone who could plot something like that was impressive, but no one went to those lengths unless they had something to win. He was sure she had told him what it was she wanted already, too. The final piece clicked in his head.

“You manipulated your best friend into a dark enough place to do something she normally wouldn’t do, to hurt me to the point to which I would seek vengeance. Then you have been pulling and prodding at those desires for revenge this entire conversation. Playing me to... to... to convince me to go out with you?!” he asked incredulously.
“You got me there.” Janna lifted both palms in the air. “Honestly, I thought we would already be mid date by the time you figured it all out. You are a lot more perceptive than Star or Marco make you out to be. But then, the real question is: did it work?”

“Honestly? That’s pretty fucked up…” Tom said with a serious face, then grinned at her, “...and I have never felt more flattered in my life.”

He held his own chin with two clawed fingers, thinking it through. It didn’t seem like he had much to lose humoring this girl, and he had a lot to win, including a chance to get back at, and perhaps even back with, Star.

“Ok, you know what? You win,” he said finally. “One date, in exchange for your honest effort at making Star jealous. Truly, you got my attention, now let’s see how long you can keep it.”

“Let’s see how long you can keep mine,” Janna retorted mockingly. “But, how about you pick me up tomorrow night at, I don’t know, seven O’ six? Right now is late, and you are a mess and smell of Star. I don’t think I am quite into that,” she shrugged.

“Fine,” Tom retorted, slightly annoyed that she was still controlling their interaction.

He definitely needed to go back home and think a lot of things through before any new dates, though, so it wasn’t exactly a bad idea to wait till the next day. Tomorrow might even be too soon, but what the hell, going out with this crazy chick was definitely better than mopping about Star in the underworld. Janna hopped from his chair and started heading out of the carriage.

Then, Tom realized he hadn’t given her a way to call him, and he didn’t know how to find her either. “Wait! There is something I need to give you first!”

“No worries! I already got them,” Janna shouted from the parking lot, waving a tiny bell and a little hammer. She turned to run away.

Tom sighed in confusion and, with an exasperated gesture, ordered his ride to go to hell. Home, sweet home.

----

It was late in the afternoon the next day, and Star had not left her room. She had arrived through the window last night, clad in a hastily conjured gray cloak. She had tried to magic up a copy of her old outfit, but for some reason that’s how the spell came out. She put the ragged ugly thing on and summoned cloudy. Even the usually friendly cloud seemed gray and depressed, with a slight green tint to it. It hadn’t gone haywire or anything, it just didn’t talk to Star at all as it dragged her back to the Diaz’s place. That was fine, Star wasn’t in a mood to talk either.

She had felt so tired, but still, she forced herself to get under the shower. The water flowing down her face hid her own tears, as they slid down her cheekmarks. She felt dirty in some undefined way, in a way the water falling on her would not clean. She knew it was ridiculous. She was not usually ashamed of her decisions, even when they got her into trouble, and it had been her decision to sleep with Tom. It had even been fun at times, especially when she had imagined Marco instead. She had mostly enjoyed herself, except for at the end, when it all came crashing down. Yet, she knew she regretted it. She tried to figure out what exactly she regretted. Doing it with Tom? That it had been her first time? That she had been thinking of Marco? Hurting Tom? Betraying Marco?

She had been surprised at her last thought. Of course she was not betraying Marco. Marco wasn’t her boyfriend, he was Jackie’s. Nonetheless, even after she finished showering, even after she had
gone to bed, even after she woke up the next day, she could not get rid of that foolish thought. Now it was the end of the afternoon and she was still thinking it. She felt even sillier for it.

She was hungry. She had snuck in a box of cereal and snacked on it through the morning, but now she was not in the mood for more cereal. The Diaz family had called her down to eat, both at breakfast and at lunch, knocking on her door or shouting her name. She hadn’t answered, and they had mostly let her be. That was at least an advantage of the Diaz household. Back in Mewni her mother would have dragged her out of her room to some royal function or another, or order that she be dragged out by servants. Of course, back in Mewni she could also have had run away to the Forest of Certain Death and hid there the entire day. She thought of running away now, maybe go to the Bounce Lounge or even visit Pony Head in St. O’s. But, she realized, the only scissors she had access to here were in Marco’s room. He was the last person she wanted to talk to right now, even to ask for them.

Just then, as if on cue, she heard three quick and forceful knocks on the door. “Ok, Star, I am sorry, I don’t know what’s the matter, but I need to talk to you!”

“Marco, go away! I don’t want to talk right now!” Star shouted back through the locked door.

He had come up six times already that day. First when he got home early in the morning, and most recently just an hour ago. Each time more insistent than the last. Each time she told him to go away, and he reluctantly let her be. It was not really true that she didn’t want to see Marco, it was more like she couldn’t face him. Would he ask about last night at the concert? Or about what was going on with her? He sounded concerned, and hurt, but how could she explain to him what had happened? There was no way Star could tell Marco about how she had felt when she saw him kiss Jackie. There was even less chance that she would be able to talk about what had happened with Tom.

“Star, you don’t have to talk about anything if you don’t want to,” Marco insisted. “Look, I am worried about you, my parents are worried about you, and I would really like to know what is bothering you.”

No, Marco, you really wouldn’t.

He continued, “if you need something, or if I can help, please, please let me know. But if you don’t want to talk, then don’t talk. But I. Still. Need. To. Talk. To. You.”

He had put a lot of force behind that last sentence, and emphasized the ‘I’ and ‘you’ parts. Star blinked for a moment, peering out of the bed sheet that she had bundled herself into as she sat in a corner of her room. Wait, so Marco wanted to talk about something other than what was going wrong with her? She wasn’t sure if that made her feel relieved or hurt.

“Star, Jackie and I got into a fight last night…” she heard him say.

Marco sounded genuinely distraught. Something pinched at the princess’ heart. She felt guilt pooling around her like a cold mist. Guilt at not being there for her friend, or guilt about Tom? Or guilt that she secretly had, for a split of a second, felt happy that Marco and Jackie were fighting, before realizing that must be horrible for her friend? It was so infuriatingly hard to pick her feelings apart right now!

“Give me a second, Marco,” she answered after a brief pause.

In the end, it didn’t matter how she felt, because all of her was in agreement on one thing: if she failed to be there for him now, she would forever regret it. She walked to her bed slowly and took
the wand from under the pillow.

“Radiant Shadow Transform!” she shouted, conjuring an outfit for herself.

She hadn’t bothered to dress yet that day. The spell fell short of its usual level of fashion forwardness, but nonetheless Star found herself dressed in a fairly decent plain black dress and white leggings.

“Defensive Gate Withdrawal!” she yelled without much enthusiasm. The giant padlock and portcullis vanished from her bedroom door. “Ok, you can come in now, Marco. What happened?”

---

Janna had to admit to herself she was nervous that afternoon. She was never nervous, either about mischief or about boys. Sure, her courtship techniques might have lacked a certain finesse, but she had never exactly been shy in front of boys she found attractive. In fact, she usually managed to put them in the more uncertain position. It helped that the only men who truly managed to leave her speechless had been dead and buried long before she was born. It was hard to feel insecure with Keats, when she could only reach him through the pages of a book, his words already set in place where her response to them would never taint their truth. After that, it hardly mattered what opinion flesh and blood boys might have of her. It was not that she was not interested in a few select cases, but if they did not reciprocate, well, it was no big concern of hers.

Tom was different. Tom was not human. He was a mystery, and not the way the silent hunk at a party was a mystery; that is, in that the only mystery was what you had to do to get him to open up, and immediately reveal himself to be as boring as any of a dozen more idiots her age.

Marco was interesting, to an extent. He had been outside of this dimension, apparently once for sixteen years straight. He had had a demon bound to his arm. Janna felt a tingle remembering how it had felt when she was holding the eldritch appendage. Star was mysterious too, of course. The magic that she took for granted fascinated Janna. But, even compared to them, her date tonight was a whole different deal.

Tom was not human, or mewman, or just a handsome stranger from some random foreign dimension. He was a demon. He was mysterious like the night is mysterious or like death is mysterious.

Now, Janna was not fooling herself. At least she did not believe she was. She knew Tom was a jerk, an anger-management basket-case, a manipulative bastard, a ticking time-bomb, and, perhaps worst of all, a guy that very often acted just like a moody human teenager. Nonetheless, there was definitely a lot more to that particular teenager than there was to any of the idiots at her school. Tom was also very dangerous, a taste Janna realized she shared with her best friend Star.

She had fished the only truly presentable item from her wardrobe: a vintage dark green dress with knee-height skirt and a black velvet trim. She had gotten it at a thrift shop months ago and never wore it. In fact, the only reason she had taken that particular dress home, other than the color, was the the owner had told her some lady had died in it and that was why it was so discounted. She would have paid double for that!

Ok, well, she shoplifted it either way, but it was the thought that counted.

She completed her look with green heels and a black choker with a ceramic skull in the middle. Hopefully that look would not be out of place wherever Tom intended to take her out on a date. The underworld, most likely, she thought with an excited shiver.
Janna glanced at her phone. Six forty-five, still some time before she planned to ring up her ride. She wondered how the rest of her little plan was unfolding. She was sorry about what she had had to put Star through, but she knew her friend would forgive her after it all resolved for the best. The only truly unfortunate thing was that she herself could not be around to see Marco’s face when it all fell into place. The boy should be beyond himself with excitement right about now!

----

“I really don’t know where to start, Star,” said Marco gloomily, as he sat in the bed beside an equally downcast Star.

They both stared at the floor for a while, sitting there together, as close as they could get without touching each other. Star’s mind was still a jumble of awful thoughts. She wanted to break through it, to be there to comfort her friend, but she simply couldn’t.

“Do you want to tell me what the fight was about?” she ventured the question, glancing in his direction.

“Well, after you left the concert,” Marco began. Star flinched. “Sorry, maybe I should skip some of it. The concert doesn’t matter. Unless you want to talk about it?”

Star kept quiet.

“Ok, so, anyways, after the concert Jackie and I went over to her place, to you know, say goodnight and stuff...”

Even bummmed as she was Star couldn’t help but to chuckle a little bit at Marco’s embarrassed fib.

“’Say goodnight’, Marco? You got back this morning. That must have been some long good night,” she chided.

Marco blushed, but then seemed sad for some reason. Star regretted her joke almost immediately.

“Ok, well, so, Star, just to be clear, you know what people who are dating and, well, are attracted to each other, do, right? When they spend the night together, I mean?” Star blinked at this. Was he asking if she knew what sex was? “You see. At least on Earth, boys and girls are a bit different, in that the boys have a...”

Star began laughing, despite herself. There was some bitterness to the laugh, but it was overpowered by the sheer amusement at how innocent her bestie’s mental picture of her seemed to be.

“Marco! We fuck on Mewni too!” she shouted at him. Her cheekmarks immediately lit up, and then she felt a cold pang of regret remembering the previous night. “I mean, I don’t mean I have, I also don’t mean I haven’t or wouldn’t... let’s just say I understand the concept, Marco. Congrats on doing it with Jackie, by the way...” she forced the words out “Hopefully it went well?”

Marco shook his head. He stared at the floor some more. He seemed very nervous, more so than usual, more than he was even when Jackie was around.

“That’s the thing, Star. I mean, we actually have slept together before,” he confessed in a quiet whisper. Star tried her best to pretend that was news to her. Either because she did a good job of it, or because he was otherwise distracted, Marco didn’t seem to notice anything amiss, “But, last night, I did something wrong when we were, well, when we were having sex...”
“Did you do anything to her she told you not to?” Star asked. It seemed unlikely, it was Marco after all.

He shook his head and seemed a bit hurt at the implication.

“Ok, then it can’t be that bad, Marco.” She thought for a bit. “If it’s a performance issue, just take it slow and give it time, that was a pretty hectic day and I am sure Jackie would understand that you were nervous…”

There she went again, the good friend offering her bestie help in getting back with his girlfriend. Good, she thought, that’s how it should be.

“No, Star. It wasn’t a performance problem!” Marco replied, annoyed. Star flinched a bit at that.

“No, sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to yell. It is just, it was something very weird, and I can’t say it to you, even if I try. It was... well, it felt like my mind was playing tricks on me, and I said something I shouldn’t have, and that led to a whole long discussion where I realized something about me. Something that makes me even more confused. Something that I can’t say, that I think I knew but I didn’t know I knew, that I can’t spit out even though I have been planning to tell you since I got back home this morning…”

Star looked at her friend. For a moment she forgot all about Tom, about her confusing night and about her complicated feelings. She was just worried about Marco. He looked completely distressed. She wanted to figure out what to say that would make him feel better, or get him back with Jackie, or somehow fix whatever it was that was hurting him.

“Star. I have been trying to ask you all day... will you go out on a date with me?”

====

Janna stood in the curb outside her house. She had just finished collecting a few items into her small black purse. She had applied some dark lipstick, as well. Makeup was not her forte, but she figured this much at least she had gotten down by now.

She took out the bell and hit it with the ruby hammer. Immediately a fiery abyss opened up from the street in front of her, noxious fumes and searing flames exploded up into the dark sky. She heard the cries of agony of billions of ancient souls and the maddening laughs of their immortal tormentors. “Cool!”

Then she saw a large red demon chained to a wooden pillory, which was in turn attached by ropes to a small black elevator. The doors opened and she climbed inside. “Which floor, mortal?”

“Name is Janna, and, well, wherever your boss is at,” she told the creature.

She knew well to act unimpressed, but she was just a little impressed. She had friends, peers, acquaintances, occasionally pawns. Tom? Tom had minions. Well, Star probably had minions too, she thought, of both the magical and mewman kind. Janna had never been intimidated by Star, so why should Tom be any different?

“Oh, Janna, so glad you could join me,” Tom greeted her as the ‘elevator’ stopped just a few centimeters above the black stone floor of an enormous underground cavern. He was dressed in a black suit, with a white shirt and a tie, and three-eyed sunglasses over his face. He extended a hand to help her out of her ride. “Welcome, to Hell!”

She felt herself blush slightly. This wasn’t good. She reminded herself that there was still plenty of work she still had to do on Tom, this was not the time to become complacent.
“Woah, Tom, don’t you clean up nicely?” she replied.

It was a weak neg, and not really her style. But Star had told her Tom had said it to her before, so maybe just the fact Janna knew would be enough to throw him off balance a little bit. Unfortunately, after last night, she was running out of smug callbacks to flick at Tom.

“Funny, I was just about to say the same,” he retorted, raising at least one eyebrow.

His expression was hard to read behind the glasses. Intentionally so, Janna concluded.

“Since we are apparently going for a reenactment of sorts, let me offer you this,” he said, and reached with his free hand behind him, producing a nasty looking spider larger than his fist. Nice.

“Neat,” Janna smiled. Tom explained that it went on her hair and Janna allowed him to place the spider over her head. It probably did look wicked cool, even if the legs tickled a bit. “Is it venomous?”

“Deadly,” Tom assured her, “but it won’t bite unless I command it to.”

Ah, so it was only their first date and he was already putting himself in control of whether she lived or died. Oh, Tom, who knew you were such a hopeless romantic? She thought to herself. Mostly, but only mostly, in jest.

“Well, where to now? Pretty sure we are 666 years and a few months too early for the next Blood Moon Ball…” she noted.

Tom seemed caught up by surprise by her comment, despite their previous interaction. That was good, keep him guessing how much you know, Janna. The more curious he is, the less likely you die from a spider bite and all that.

He seemed to ponder things for a second. “It depends. If you are hungry I can always take you to the Faust. It is the best restaurant in this side of the underworld, and only half of what they serve is poisonous for you or would doom your soul for all eternity. After that, we can go for drinks to the Vermilion Viper Club.”

“Sounds good, but, Tom, I am fourteen, no fake ID is going to conceal that. Also, I don’t really drink…” she admitted.

“Janna, first of all, this is Hell, of course they serve alcohol to minors. Second, we can figure it out once we get there. I am sure they’ll have... juice,” he muttered disdainfully. “If that is all you truly want. So, shall we go then?”

----

“Yes! Yes, of course I will, Marco!” Star shouted, surprising even herself with how emphatic her response had been. It felt, for a moment, as if all her worries were blown away by a soothing breeze. Marco had just asked her out, and she said yes!

Wait, wait a minute. This wasn’t right. It didn’t make sense. Unless, “Marco, wait, are you asking me out just because Jackie and you broke up?”

She felt sick once again. She loved Marco. Well, no, not ‘loved’. But she had maybe a super big crush on him, she told herself, unconvincingly. If he was only asking her out to get over being dumped by Jackie, if he was about to treat her like, like... ‘like I treated Tom’ she thought to herself, then she didn’t want it, not like that.
“Actually, Star, that’s the really weird part,” Marco continued. He seemed nervous, like he expected Star to suddenly grow fangs and bite his head off. That, by the way, was not likely to happen, well at least as far as she knew. “Jackie and I didn’t break up. We had a fight, maybe our first real fight, but we, sort of, resolved it? She was the one who told me to ask you out.”

What?! That didn’t make any sense!

“Marco, is this an Earth thing?” she asked. “Because if it is, you might have to explain it to me. I am lost. You are dating Jackie, and she told you, to ask me out on a date?”

Also, did that mean Marco didn’t really want to go out with her? It was only because Jackie had asked? She felt her gut going crazy as her mind raced ahead with excuses for both why Marco actually wanted to go out with her, and excuses for why he did not and this was all a cruel misunderstanding.

“Well, I don’t fully understand it either, Star. But basically, last night I realized that, well, that I... that I like you, and I like Jackie too. It came up at the worst possible moment, but it had been on my mind since, well, since a dream I had a few weeks ago. Maybe since way earlier than that, even if I hadn’t fully understood it before,” he stammered. He seemed a little bit afraid.

“Jackie said, well, she said that she knew,” he continued. Star was a little worried he might forget to breathe, as he rushed through the full explanation. “She told me, that she thought you liked me too, and that she was happy about that, and also not happy about that, but that we would figure stuff out. She told me to ask you out, and that if you said yes, to figure out what our feelings were, you and I, I mean, and then to talk to her tomorrow.”

Then he paused, and his eyes went wide. He looked mortified. “Oh, and, I am sorry. She also told me to tell you all of this before I asked you out. I kinda messed up that part. It is sort of my first time asking anyone out when you think about it, really, sorry…”

“Oh,” Star blinked a few times.

That was, complicated, and weird, and had Jackie just, I don’t know, lent her her boyfriend?

“Well, Marco,” she said very quietly, “she is right on one thing. I... I... I do like you.”

“Oh,” said Marco.

They both stood there, looking at each other, blushing bright red.

“Then, maybe,” Star continued, with some difficulty, “maybe she is right about other stuff too. This is all super weird. I think I like you, and I am glad you like me back. I get that you like Jackie as well, and I don’t really want you two to not be together, although, if I am being super extra honest, sometimes, only sometimes, I feel like I do. I have no idea how this works, but I want to go out with you tonight, and we can figure the rest tomorrow. So, basically... my answer is still yes!”

“Oh. I am really glad, Star,” Marco said, looking at her. He still seemed a bit worried, but he also was smiling. “I do still love Jackie, though, and that means I have no clue what will happen, and that I cannot promise that we won’t all get hurt, that I won’t hurt you. If I do... if I do I am so sorry in advance, and I hope whatever happens won’t break us up as friends…”

“Marco, the end of the world couldn’t break us up as friends!”

She saw him smile, the tension inside of him seeming to ease a bit. She felt herself grow calmer too, as she realized the truth in what she had just said. Even if this did end badly, it wouldn’t be
like her and Tom, it couldn’t be. She and Marco were besties. Whatever was about to happen, they would always have that.

“Then, there is one more thing Jackie told me to say. She told me that after I explained to you what happens tomorrow, I should shut up about her and tell you that tonight is all about the two of us, and ask you if you wanted to go for fancy dinner and then dancing afterwards.”

“Marco, Jackie is awesome.” She meant it, she really really did. “But she is right, if you tell me one more time tonight something she told you to do or not do... I will punch you. Tell me where you want to take me out to!”

“How about tacos and then dancing afterwards?”

“Sounds awesome!” she replied beaming him a smile. Then, Star realized she was wearing a dress that looked like she was about to attend a funeral in it. “Maybe we both should get ready first, though. Check again in thirty, Marco? Tell your parents we are not having dinner at home!”

----

“So, how do you like the Hors d’oeuvres?” Tom asked from across the table.

Janna had just tried one pentagonal shaped cracker with some raw bits of meat on top of it. Surprisingly, it was delicious. But she wasn’t sure she wanted to know what kind of meat it was. At least she had made her dietary restrictions clear to Tom before they got to the restaurant. In addition to nothing that would kill her or damn her soul forever, she had insisted on no human parts, nor any other creature capable of speech or otherwise similarly intelligent. She felt that wording was probably airtight enough that she wouldn’t need to break the mood by asking about every dish. Besides, she had some trust that Tom would understand and follow the spirit of her request, at least to a degree.

“Well, I like them so far,” Janna said noncommittally. “Cool place, by the way.”

The Faust was an extraordinarily luxurious venue. The black marble walls and blood-red vitrains, depicting demons and other unearthly denizens, made it look like some perverse imitation of a medieval church. Apparently it took years to get a reservation, if not decades, but Tom had simply commanded they be given the best table in the house, and two poor undead saps had had to find themselves another place to have their 300th anniversary dinner. Janna could certainly respect the theatricality of such a conspicuous display of power, if nothing else.

“Ah, Master Tom, it’s been far too long. What a pleasure to see you back in our humble establishment,” a tall pearl-white demon with ebony hair, bright azure eyes, and curled goat horns walked up to their table and received them with a vow. “And, may I add, with such a lovely lady! It is good to see your highness is, oh, how do the kids say these days, ‘getting back in the saddle’?”

“Are you mocking me, Adorjan?” Tom’s eyes lit up in red for a second.

The waiter remained impassive, an arm in front of him holding a napkin, another extending forward the menus and depositing two leathery volumes in front of each of them.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, master Tom,” the pale demon replied in perfect deadpan. “After all, I am but a humble servant. One who pays no heed to scurrilous rumors regarding the romantic travails of my betters, no matter how widespread. Rather, shall I offer the two of you anything to drink? Madam? Sire?”

Janna stifled a chuckle, and quickly asked Tom about ordering recommendations to, less than
artfully, but effectively enough, distract him from the bad mood he was beginning to show. Tom sighed and rattled off a series of quick orders, which Adorjan wrote down as fast as the demon prince was able to name the dishes. After that, with the utmost professionalism, and only the faintest hint of a triumphant smirk, he bowed to the two guests, and dashed towards the kitchen.

“So, you mentioned helping me make Star jealous,” Tom said offhandedly after the waiter had left. Evidently his insinuations had brought the princess back to the forefront of the demon prince’s mind. “Pretty sure she doesn’t even know we are here, though. Was that just a ruse to get me to invite you down here or do you intend to hold up your end of the bargain?”

“Tom, don’t you think that it would be too obvious if we simply walked up to Star the day after, well, you know what, and told her to her face we were dating? She is naive, but not that naive. She would know what’s up in an instant.” It was a plausible excuse, the truth usually was. “No. Here is how it is going to work, if you must know: we are going to go on a very real date tonight, and we are going to bond, so that I know enough about you and you know enough about me that Star will believe we have been dating. Whether we go on a second date or not, we will also need to wait at least a week before ‘casually’ running into Star. Then I will hold up my end of the bargain, as you say. I’ll simply pretend to be really into you and see how Star responds to that.”

“Pretend? You mean you are not really into me,” Tom asked, slightly surprised, unable to avoid the bait.

Janna kept her face unreadable.

“Well, right now, I am mostly just curious,” she played it cool. “But my point is, when we finally meet Star, I should be able to act like I am really,” she looked directly into the dark glasses, “really,” she touched his arm and leaned forward, “into you.” For a second, her face lingered right in front of his, and she basically breathed the last part over his closed mouth.

A moment later, she was leaning back in her chair again and casually pondering one of the vitrails. “You know, really sell it. For Star, of course.”

Tom was silent, unreadable behind his dark glasses. Janna still felt she had probably made her point.

“But Tom,” she added. “I think it is you who does not want to hold up his end of the bargain. I did not ask for a business meeting at a fancy restaurant, I asked for a date. I assume you don’t normally spend your dates talking about your exes, right?”

“Well, it’s honestly been a while since I have been on a date with someone new…” Tom admitted, embarrassed.

He was kinda cute when he opened up like that. Janna did not have much time to enjoy it, however. She needed to press him for a bit more, keep him talking, before he realized his mistake and closed up once more.

“How about you tell me about yourself? Or about your life here? It must be so cool to rule over all the Underworld!” Flattery and getting others to talk about themselves were both good ways to put them at ease, and in this case, it helped that Janna was genuinely curious about this whole Prince of Hell deal.

“Well, I don’t really rule all of it, not even close. You see, ‘the Underworld’ is a vast meta-dimension, older than Earth or Mewni, much older than myself. But my family has always had an important place in…”
“Whoa, Marco, I am honored that you are sharing so much of your culture with me, on our date!” Star nearly shouted the last three words.

She knew the whole restaurant probably had heard it, and it made her a bit giddy. But mostly, she wanted to say it for herself, just to make sure she believed it.

“Star, was that really necessary? Also, my culture? I mean, my dad’s family is from Mexico, but I was born in California…” he responded.

He didn’t actually seem angry at her, more like, well, nervous. Nervous like when he was on a date with Jackie, Star observed with pride. Ok, not really the same way, but close enough.

“Mexico? I meant your Earth-culture, Marco!” she clarified.

‘La Fonda de Don Alberto’ was probably a more authentic Mexican place than Britta’s, their usual taco joint. The food here was spicier and less greasy, and there were more private places to sit close together. But, to Star, it was mostly just a new place on Earth. Besides, Marco had promised to teach her a new Earth dance afterwards. Something called Salsa.

Marco chuckled, “I guess sometimes I forget you really aren’t from around here.”

He did? Star thought it was still pretty obvious that she wasn’t really from this dimension, although she had gotten a bit better at blending in, when she didn’t use magic.

“Maybe I had gotten so familiar with you, that I forgot there are still so many more things I haven’t showed you…” he trailed off, looking directly into her eyes.

“What would you want to show me, then?” Star said blushing.

Marco didn’t respond. He seemed to be staring at her, seemingly lost in thought, or maybe like he was seeing her for the first time.

Star felt her cheekmarks lit up just a little bit. “Um, Marco?”

“Ah, yeah, uhmmm,” he snapped out of it and began fidgeting with his fork. “Well, right now, I guess I want to show you this Pollo con Mole,” he laughed nervously.

Star laughed too and focused on her plate. She cut a bit of the chicken and tried it more to defuse the tension than because she was hungry. Although, well, that was true too.

“Whoa! Is this spicy chocolate sauce?! Marco, this is truly a marvel of Earth cuisine!” she declared, jumping from her seat.

“I knew you would like it!” Marco beamed at her.

Of course, that was the thing about Marco. He knew her so well. They knew each other’s likes and dislikes. They could usually predict what the other would say about almost anything. They shared all their... most of their secrets, Star thought, guiltily. So, what did that mean for their first date? Was there anything left for them to talk about that was different from what they talked about as friends? How was this different from two besties just hanging out?

“Star, is anything the matter? You went all serious for a moment there. Did I say anything wrong? I thought you liked the food. I thought it would make you smile, since you have been sort of... sad
these last few days. Not that you should smile if you don’t want to,” Marco babbled on. “Is just, I like it when you smile, Star. I feel that when you do, it lights the whole room. Yeah, kinda like that.”

----

"... and because I lost the game of dice, I had to revive the soldier’s wife. But what the idiot didn’t know is that she had been fucking his brother the entire time he had been away from home. So, out of spite, I offhandedly mentioned that little detail and, wouldn’t you know it, she was back down here the week after. The brother too!” Tom concluded his latest story and they both laughed.

He had long ago gotten rid of the sunglasses as he became more and more at ease with the girl. Janna indulged him, it was definitely better stuff than what she usually heard from her classmates, and the food had been delicious. The apple tart at the end was pure paradise, maybe literally.

“You know, Janna, Star never really had the patience to listen to my stories like this. It is always ‘let’s go to another dimension!’ or ‘yeah, yeah... boring, let’s play at something’ with her,” Tom added. Janna made a show of raising an eyebrow. “Oh, right, not saying that name tonight. Sorry. How about you, anything I should know about you?”

“Well, nothing as exciting as ruling a hell,” she emphasized the ‘a’, showing she had been listening. “I guess I am sort of into witchcraft stuff, but most things I do don’t really work. Me and... a friend, held a seance for a dead clown once. That one worked, actually, but it got interrupted by an idiot bird-man-midget-thing. I like poetry and metal, which is maybe not the most common combination, but also less rare than you might think. Dunno, I am also sorta good at messing with people.”

“Ah, so resurrecting the death and manipulating mortals. I can see why you are drawn to, well, this,” Tom indicated their surroundings. “Is that all you are after, though? The magics of the Underworld? There are easier bargains you could have struck for that than this date, mor... Janna.”

“I imagine so,” she shrugged her shoulders. “This seemed more fun, though. I guess I figure I have my whole life to go after the powers of the occult the usual way, but how many girls can say they have actually dated a prince of darkness? Besides, it is not just the title, I also think you are hot. I guess I thought so since the first time I saw you, when you were floating down the hallway the day you... went to our school.”

A gleam in Tom’s eyes told Janna of her mistake. She had said too much. Crap, she was so stupid! All these manipulations and mind games and she had been the first to admit to something like that. She might as well just had come out and said she had a long-time teenage crush on Tom!

“Well, I suppose it is nice to hear that,” Tom said, infuriatingly noncommittal. “I think we should move to the Viper now. Get some drinks, loosen up, maybe tell each other how we really feel,” he teased. “Adorjan, you may now bring the check.”

Janna felt like she wanted the earth to swallow her. Then again, this was probably the place you ended up when that happened, anyway.

The demon waiter arrived almost instantly. He seemed to notice Janna’s predicament and shot her a mysterious look.

“Ah, I see, Sire wishes to pay in kind, rather than keep balances in the royal tab? One must wonder whether this is so that his human date might be suitably impressed.” A pale white hand produced a small black leather booklet. “Shall I make a gesture of showing her the zeros? There are quite a
few of those…”

“That,” Tom interrupted the server with a furious look, “will certainly not be necessary.”

He took the booklet, looked at its contents and discretely slipped a bunch of red banknotes and silver coins into it, making sure Janna couldn’t actually count them.

Adorjan took the booklet from him, with a raised eyebrow. “A less discrete servant than myself might comment on how his highness puts far much effort into a pretend date that is, ostensibly, part of a dastardly scheme. In fact, such servant might observe that master Tom looks far more cheerful today than in the whole of last year. But, of course, I am not one to say any such thing.”

Tom glared daggers at the waiter. Janna gave him a silent look of thanks, and received the faintest of winks in return.

----

The place Marco had taken Star after dinner was also new to her. It was not really a dance club in the way the Bounce Lounge was, or a fancy dance hall like the Royal Waltz Hall in Mewni, but a strange mixture of the two. Most of the place was covered only by a dimly lit wooden dance floor, with tables set aside only on one end of the room. The music was unusual as well: it sounded older than pop or rock music, but it was also surprisingly fast-paced and rhythmic. People were dancing in complicated patterns of rapid twists and close embraces. Their movements did not seem vulgar at all, but they still felt sensual in a way that was hard to describe.

“Whoa, I really have never seen this kind of dance!” Star observed, enthusiastically. It looked, well, it looked kinda intimate. She blushed slightly.

“That’s the point, Star. I wanted to show you something new tonight,” he looked at her with those big brown eyes and Star felt herself melt. “Now, I am not like, super good at this or anything. Some of the regulars here do this every weekend, for years.” Star noticed then an older couple where the man seemed to be holding the woman mostly upside down along the line formed by his outstretched leg. “But I know enough to teach you the basics, if you want.”

“Of course I do!” Star nodded vigorously. She was always up for learning new things, and only like a million times more so if it also meant dancing with Marco. “So, how do we begin?”

“Well, first, you hold my hands like this. Now, when I move my feet like this, you move back like so,” Marco began.

Star was a quick learner, and she enjoyed how confident Marco sounded as he explained the moves or corrected her form. He was also very careful in how he guided her through the dance floor and through the turns. Besides, unlike that time, long ago, with the bicycle thing, there was absolutely no danger of him letting go without warning her.

There was no holding her upside down, or even lifting her from the dance floor. There were, however, plenty of touches on her shoulders, or her arms, or the small of her back as Marco guided her from one move to the next. It felt, to Star, like loving, almost sexual, caresses. She wondered silently if Marco intended them that way. She gasped as he pushed forward and held her, one foot up, laying on air, horizontal to the dance floor. 'Wow, Marco! I wish we were alone now, then I would show you a move or two,' she thought to herself, biting her lip.

After a while, Star realized that most of her existing dancing skills, honed over many years of Silver Bell Balls and other such events, translated quite well to this strange Earth dance. Even her
Bounce Lounge moves came in handy once in a while, although she wasn’t sure if that was how it worked in general, or if she and Marco were simply doing their own thing, as they often did.

“You know, Star, I don’t think I have ever been on a date like this,” Marco told her as he lifted her back up. “I mean, a date where I am the one teaching things or planning stuff.”

“Well, do you like it?” Star asked nervously. “I could have done the planning if you prefer. There are tons of romantic dimensions I could show you, but you kinda sprung this on me by surprise... do you know there is a spa on the cloud dimension? I mean, not that I dislike you taking me here, or teaching me this dance, or the food, not at all... I kinda like you planning stuff... but if you prefer the other way around...”

“Star, I do like it. Planning stuff, I mean. It is a nice change of pace,” Marco smiled at her, sweetly. He was looking at her in a way she didn’t think he had before. Well, maybe once, the day she went to the Blood Moon Ball. “Besides, Star, I think you were kinda rambling.”

“Yeah...” Star admitted, her mind half lost in Marco’s eyes. “Is that bad?”

“No. But, Star,” he leaned forward, “that’s usually my thing.”

She barely realized when he planted his lips on hers, or when she parted her own to give him access. She noticed, as if in a trance, that they were indeed kissing. It was a sweet, caring kiss, but in no way could be mistook as friendly. It was a loving kiss, with the smallest hint of passion building up between their barely open mouths. The older woman in the couple they had seen before winked at Star as they passed them by. The princess felt like she was in a trance again. She saw the scene both from within and from outside of herself, she felt Marco’s lips against her own, but also something else, a feeling of surprised bliss that added to her own but was not her own. It didn’t matter. It was perfect. Marco Diaz was kissing her and it all was perfect.

----

Tom and Janna sat besides each other on a long black marble bar, under a fluorescent purple light. The Red Viper was packed with demons, undead patrons and indeterminate fiendish creatures, but they all gave the underworld prince and his date ample space. The stools at either side of them remained unoccupied, even as furtive glances were often cast their way.

In front of Tom was a half empty glass of some fiery amber liquid. Literally fiery, as the surface seemed to constantly be in flames, and the demon drank it that way. Janna herself was slowly sipping from a pink concoction set in a martini glass. It was mostly full still. She was trying to pace herself. Despite all her bad girl creed, she did not really drink. In fact, she made a point of principle not to. But Tom had insisted and, not wanting to disappoint her date, she had let him order something light for her, just this once. A little desecration was perhaps in order, after all, seeing as how she was in hell. The cocktail tasted pretty sweet, fortunately, and didn’t seem anywhere near as terrifying as whatever sort of hard liquor the demon prince was having.

“So, Janna, I was thinking,” Tom smiled at her mischievously. “How about a game, to pass the time and to get to know each other better. After all, we should, how did you put it? Bond? For the plan, of course.”

“Oh, a very simple one: you ask me a question, any question. I either answer it truthfully or I take a big swig at my drink. Then I get to ask you a question, same terms,” Tom explained. “Sounds simple enough?”
“Why would I agree to that, when I can just ask you stuff normally?” Janna stalled.

She understood the benefits well enough, actually. But she also suspected she would fare poorly against Tom in any kind of drinking contest. Besides, challenging him on this, at least a bit, seemed like a good move, even if she planned to acquiesce in the end.

“Because, you get to ask stuff you wouldn’t normally ask, and since it is a game, and you are just trying to get me to drink, I can’t get mad about inappropriate questions,” Tom explained. “Also, because it is fun.”

“Ok, fine,” Janna raised her hands in mock surrender. So, the plan was to make Tom uncomfortable, well, she could do that. “So, was Star your first, and if not, who?”

Tom’s three eyes widened as he regarded the smirking girl sitting besides her. “Didn’t you say we weren’t mentioning that name tonight?”

“I said I didn’t want you to spend the date talking about Star. You can still answer if I am the one asking about it,” Janna observed. Then her smile went wide as she realized her play had gone even better than she had expected. “By the way, that was not an answer, and you asked me a question. Which means you drink and I get to ask again.”

Tom groaned, but to his credit, he lifted the glass and took a big mouthful of the blazing liquid. “Fine. As you said, your turn again. You cannot repeat the question, by the way.”

“No need for that,” Janna replied.

Honestly, she had not cared for an answer, she was just aiming to shock the demon into drinking for now. Problem was, he was probably ready now for her to try to surprise him, so any other question about Star would probably be met with a more careful response now. She thought back to her books on demons and their curses, surely there were also questions Tom would not answer.

“Tom Lucitor, what is your true name?” she asked, loudly.

The entirety of the bar’s eyes seemed to be on Tom now. He just chuckled.

“Yeah, right,” he commented, made a nod towards their curious audience, and took another swig. “You play dirty, Janna Ordonia.”

“Uh, you know my last name?” she muttered. “Rats!” she exclaimed just after, once she realized her mistake.

“Yes, I do. Also, I get two questions now,” Tom stated matter-of-factly. “First, how did you know Star and I would... ahem... get together after the concert?”

It was a pretty open-ended question. Janna considered giving a cryptic explanation, but that did not seem to be the spirit of this particular game.

“Well, I knew you would be there because you are Hell’s biggest Love Sentence fan,” she proclaimed loudly, taking pleasure in watching Tom squirm as the bar went silent for a second.

She knew about the prince’s music taste because Marco had written a brief note about it in his computer, one of the few times he had started, and then soon stopped, trying to keep a journal. But Tom had not asked about that and thus he did not get that information.

“I also knew Star would not be able to handle being with Jackie and Marco when they were on a
date. I mean, those two are PDA-central and Star is practically Egyptian, since she lives in denial about how much she likes Marco.” Denial, the Nile, it was hilarious, Janna thought to herself. “So, all that I needed to do was ensure that they would all go together, wait for the inevitable to happen and for you to see it... and well, I had to plant the thought on Star about the possibility of sleeping with you…”

“You…” Tom began surprised, almost asking the obvious question. He stopped himself with a smile, “... are quite resourceful. Alright, second question, what does your plan for Star entail now, from this point forward? All of it.”

Janna sighed, reached out for her glass and took a generous sip.

----

It was late that night when Marco and Star finally made it back to the Diaz’s home. They had spent the entire evening dancing, talking and, Star recalled with a strangely pleasant sensation in her stomach, kissing copiously. Her legs were tired now, but she was beaming with happiness. More importantly, Marco beamed too.

“That was amazing, Star!” he remarked, making her blush. “I don’t think I have ever seen anyone pick up salsa so quickly.”

“Well, Marco, we have lots of dances like that back in Mewni,” Star pointed out. “Ok, I mean, not exactly like that. If my mom saw me moving my hips back there, she would totally flip...”

It was his turn to blush, if only a little. It wasn’t like Star had never shaked it when they went out to party at the Bounce Lounge, but that was just her having fun dancing with friends, moving for the sake of moving and riding the high energy. This had been different. For one, this time there had been a lot more close contact while said hip-moving was going on.

“I guess it has been a while since I’ve seen you dance this kind of dance...” Marco’s words trailed off.

Star knew what time he meant: the Blood Moon Ball. It really wasn’t a memory she wanted to dwell much on right now. Fortunately, it seemed Marco also didn’t feel like bringing that up tonight either.

“I just sorta forgot you could move so… gracefully.” It was obvious he had substituted the word in the last minute.

As curious as Star felt about what Marco was originally intending to say, she decided to just take the chance to break away from the topic of her dancing altogether.

“Hey! I am a magical princess, remember? Grace is kinda my thing!” she boasted, as she unceremoniously launched herself at the couch, knocking the remote. It flew several feet into the air, bounced once on the table in front of her, and hit the floor with a loud thud.

“I see that,” Marco retorted with a raised eyebrow.

Star just smiled at him.

It was weird being with him like this. One moment she was speechless Princess Butterfly on a date with her long time crush, half-incredulous it was even happening. The next she was Star, hanging
out with her forever bestie, not worrying at all what he thought of her, because well, nobody knew her better. She wondered if Marco felt the same way. It was strange, but not altogether unpleasant. Not at all, in fact.

“Uh,” Marco said suddenly, looking at a note that had flown to the floor from said living room table, following Star’s antics. He lifted it up, and began reading.

Star looked quizzically at him.

“It is a note from mom and dad,” the boy confirmed. “Apparently they decided to also go out for dinner tonight, since we weren’t going to be here. It says that they might be out late, and to not wait up. Looks like we have the house to ourselves...”

“In that case, Marco,” Star said with a big smile, “let’s just go up to my room.”

“W...Wh... I mean... you mean?” Marco began.

Star stared at him for a second, quickly realizing what the boy must have thought, her cheekmarks glowed slightly.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” Star chuckled. “Marco, you have been to my room a thousand times already! It’s just, my legs hurt right now, and my bed is more comfortable than the couch...”

Now that she thought about Marco and her bed, she herself wasn’t entirely sure she really hadn’t meant it that way, actually. Certainly it hadn’t been a conscious plan on her part. But, well, maybe if it happened now it wouldn’t be too bad. Then again, would that be rushing things? Certainly it was too soon, right? Right? Too soon after...

“Right. Sure thing, Star. It’s just, well, last time I thought nothing of an offer like that, it ended up being... woah, I guess that’s way T.M.I. Never mind, I said nothing,” he stammered.

Star raised an eyebrow. She was about to make a quip about his first time with Jackie, but she neither wanted to bring that up now, nor was sure she could keep it a secret how much she really knew of the matter.

“Hey, you know, if your legs are too tired, I could probably carry you up,” he added with a smile.

“Really? Such a gentleman, Sir Diaz,” Star affected a mocking tone, even though she knew her blush probably betrayed her. “Please, proceed.”

He lifted her without problems and carried her in his arms up the stairs without much effort. Star was not heavy and Marco had once thrown Man-arm flying through the air, so this was not surprising. What was surprising, to Star at least, was how comfortable she felt letting him move her around like that. She was not exactly down with the damsel act as a rule, but somehow, with Marco, right now, it felt alright. He let her down in her own bed, far more gently than necessary, considering how Star normally ‘landed’ on her bed herself.

“Well, Star, this was an amazing night. I am so glad I asked you out,” he said, then he seemed to trail off, pensive. “Hope it was fun for you too. Maybe it is time we both got some rest?”

Star felt cold as he said that. It was like something was leaving her body, something warm and important, and below it there was a bad thing...

Right. She hadn’t thought about Tom or the last night at all since dinner. Even when the topic of her dancing, and the Blood Moon Ball, had almost came up just now, she had instinctively avoided
thinking about her ex. But if Marco left now, then she was alone with her thoughts again. She wasn’t yet ready to face them.

There was also the matter of the next morning. Wasn’t Marco supposed to talk to Jackie then? Then what? Would Jackie be mad after all? Was Marco supposed to choose then? What if he didn’t chose Star? Or if he did, but then regretted it? This whole date had felt like a dream come true, but now that it was ending, Star realized something horrifying: you woke up from dreams. She couldn’t do that, not again.

“Marco... don’t go,” she whispered at him as he began to walk away. He turned back to look at her. She needed to say something, anything, that would prolong the dream. “Marco, if you want to, how to put it, heh, say goodnight... we can do that, you know?” Star said, trying her best to give him a confident smile.

She wasn’t sure that was what she wanted, not so soon after last night, after Tom. But somehow, if it was with Marco, then it would be ok. Better than ok, she realized, giving her ‘bestie’ an up and down look. It would be literally a dream come true, and if the timing wasn’t quite right, then well, that was just a minor detail...

“Star... don’t take this the wrong way, but I’d rather not.”

She felt the rejection hit her like a slap to the face.

He seemed to take notice of her reaction because he flinched as well. “Is not that I don’t want to, I do. Hell, after all that dancing I definitely want to... well, you know. But we are talking to Jackie tomorrow. I am not sure how she would take something like that. Even if that wasn’t the case, I am not sure I am ready, not yet, not tonight. Star, please don’t be mad, but, could we, could we take it slow?”

Star felt confused. On the one hand, she wasn’t sure she was ready herself. On the other, ‘taking it slow’? What if this was their first and only date? What if things didn’t work out well tomorrow? What if...? But Marco had talked about it like it was a done deal that there would be time to take it slow, or at least like he hoped, just as much as she did, that there would be.

“Then, Marco, can you stay here anyways? Just, you know, sleep together. I mean literally just sleep?”

She had turned around as she said it. For some reason she didn’t want to face him as she asked, just in case he said no again. She felt him sit on her bed, and then lie down, and then hug her from behind.

“Sure, Star, that sounds lovely.”

“Hey, Marco?” she asked after a few minutes of heavenly silence.

“Yeah?”

“You know we are fully clothed, right? We should at least change into our pajamas...”

“Right...”

---

“You are, like, soo evil,” Janna complained loudly, leaning on Tom’s shoulder for support as they walked down the long black staircase. She sounded like a fool, and she knew it. Walked like one
too, and yet could not avoid it. “I think... I am drunk... Why am I drunk? I mean, I answered like a hundred of your stupid questions and you just drank each time, like a freaking chicken! A thirsty chicken! Hah! So why am I drunk and not you?”

“Two reasons,” Tom grinned at her as he helped her walk. “First, I hold my alcohol way better than you do. Second, that pink sugary thing I ordered for you? Second strongest hitter in the whole cocktail menu!” He let out a nasty snicker.

“Pure, undiluted, evil!” Janna bemoaned, and chuckled, for no freaking good reason.

“So, Janna, just to be clear about what I learned tonight: You manipulated Star into sleeping with me so that she would then be ready to agree to go out on a date with Marco. Which you didn’t think she would do until she...” he began, angrily.

“Yeah, yeah, until she touched rock bottom by sleeping with you, so that her stubborn pride and denial could not possibly get in the way!” she shouted, carelessly.

Something in the back of her mind was yelling that she shouldn’t have said that. But who cared now? It was the truth and she had explained it to Tom already. If he wanted to know that fucking badly, then he better be able to handle the truth. The truth about what he meant to his oh so precious Star.

Tom’s eyes glowed red, his pace was quicker now, almost dragging her feet along the stone steps. It actually hurt, but she felt the sensation muffled by something, probably her own state of intoxication.

“I see. And you said you also arranged for Marco to ask her out, by making sure Jackie noticed Star liked Marco?” he asked. “Explain again to me how in Azrael’s ten thousand names that is supposed to work...”

“Well, the real trigger was that she needed to realize Marco liked Star back, even if he, dense motherfucker that he is, did not yet get it himself. You see, Jackie is pretty perceptive, and she has this big thing about... heh... I forget the word right now. But she will actually push Star and Marco together... at least I think she will...” Janna continued.

Oh god, oh god, why was she telling Tom that? He was going to murder her for it! Literally. Somehow it did not seem to matter as much anymore, though. She felt this all didn’t matter, like it was happening in a dream. A spinning dream.

“So, you never had any intention of helping me get together with Star. Correct?” Tom asked as they reached the bottom of the stairs. “None at all!”

Fire danced around the two of them. It was pretty.

“I mean, I never promised that. I promised to try and make her jealous, and I was going to do my best. But she is not whom I want you to end up with, Tom...”

She turned around to look at him. Their faces were so close now, she looked intently at his beautiful blue lips. He seemed less angry for a second, and then he shifted to look away nervously.

He continued to help her walk, through a long corridor and a second flight of stairs, leading to a small metal door embedded in a pentagram frame. He was a bit gentler with her now. Not terribly so, but at least he was not dragging her around like she was made of rags. He remained silent the whole time, probably doing a second mental pass over the information she had just carelessly revealed to him, again. At the end of it, he seemed more downcast than mad.
“Anyways, Janna. I guess I can’t really blame you for the fallout. It’s not like I didn’t know I wasn’t the one Star wanted...” he spoke with a voice full of defeat and resignation. “And, well, I had fun tonight. I really did. You are certainly a here of a girl. Besides, I have to admit that, as much as I hate the outcome, your plan was surprisingly well thought out.”

He paused and ran a hand over the back of his head. “How about I fetch you a big glass of water, don’t actually kill you, and instead send you back home?”

That wasn’t quite what Janna had hoped for, but she had to admit it sounded nice under the circumstances.

A few minutes later, she was sitting in a red leather chair with horns sticking out of the sides of the headrest, in Tom’s bedroom, drinking from a large Greek vase. He was sitting on his surprisingly plain bed, looking down at the floor. In the wall closest to them, an endless waterfall of molten lava flowed from a large horned skull into a pentagram pool. There was also a disc-shaped wooden torture rack of some sort there. The opposite wall had a series of shelves and glass displays, as well as the room’s lone bookcase. There were also three different arcade game machines and a ping pong table, for some reason. It was interesting how surreal and at the same time how mundane that room was.

“Why so glum?” she finally spoke.

She was not exactly fully herself yet, but felt a lot better than moments ago. They had been sitting there in silence for a very long while, and it was becoming unbearable. In a way, Tom being irate would have been easier to deal with than him being this desolate. Did he truly love Star so much?

“I mean, you won,” she admitted, as much as it pained her to do so. “You got me all figured out and I feel I barely scratched the surface. I guess I don’t really measure up to demon standards with the whole intrigue game, after all…”

“That’s not exactly true,” Tom replied unhappily. “I don’t really have you all figured out, not even close. All I really got you to tell me was your plan for Star. I actually didn’t ask that much about you.”

Somehow, rather than her making him feel better, his words had managed to make Janna feel much worse.

“Yeah, well, I guess there wasn’t that much to know there, especially not much you would care about knowing,” Janna sighed, sullenly. “Just an ordinary girl playing games with things she doesn’t understand. Guess you get that sort of thing all the time...”

“Heh, I wish,” Tom shot back. The briefest of smiles crossed his lips. “I mean, there are plenty of mortals looking for a deal with the devil, for sure. Some of them come to me, and well, I have gotten tons of calls from girls ready to offer their body in exchange for the powers of hell and stuff, if you must know. But honestly, this is the first time where being with me seems to be the boon, and not the price...”

Ah, so that answered her question about Star being, or rather, not being, Tom’s first. Well, maybe.

“Why would being with you be considered a price to pay?!” Janna asked, genuinely surprised. Sure, Tom had his issues, but then again, they all did. At least he was not boring. Then, in a more sly tone, she added, “also, out of curiosity, how many of those offers did you accept?”

It wasn’t that she really cared all that much about whether or not he had, well, ‘dated’, anyone
before Star, of course. It’s just that, by now, having evaded answering that question twice, the
demon prince had made figuring out that part of his past somewhat of a challenge for her.

“None! Come on! I won’t say I was never tempted, but I can’t think of anything more annoying
than a demanding occultist who thinks she is doing you a favor by telling you exactly how she
expects to be ravished by the evil demon and then asks for a ton of magical crap in return!” Tom
made a face of disgust. “Brimstone diggers! They are the worst.”

Janna drank some more water, a bit frustrated that she was once again getting no information. Well,
no, that wasn’t exactly true, actually. Maybe she hadn’t gotten the information she wanted, but, in a
way, she had gotten just the one she needed. She looked at a glass display on the other side of the
room. Inside it were a ruby the size of her head, a dragon skull, and a black iron urn decorated with
snakes, along with a dozen or so smaller items.

“Magical crap like that?” she pointed at the display.

“I suppose. Is that what you are after too, after all?” Tom glared at her, taking the bait.

“No. I am curious about it, sure, but the thing I really want in this room is not behind glass,” she
quipped.

It felt weird, being so honest about it. Must be the stupid drink still.

“Are you sure?” Tom teased her. “That’s the Ruby of Aeons, which can produce inextinguishable
flames. That’s the skull of Tareth the Vile. That’s the Urn of Midra’Apep, which can raise dead
kings. Are you saying none of that is what you are after?”

He smirked. She held his gaze and smiled back.

“Tempting, but no, not at the moment,” Janna said, standing up from the chair.

She was feeling much better now. Not clearheaded enough to avoid making bad decisions, but
stable enough to see them through. Besides, she was going to need all that liquid courage for what
she was about to do.

“Right now, the most tempting thing in this room, is right, here,” she grabbed at his tie. “So, how
about we flip the script, and you let me ravish the evil demon.”

Tom raised two eyebrows, left and middle. “Well, if that’s truly all you want...”

“It isn’t,” Janna admitted, still honest, “but it will do for now.”

She walked up to the edge of the demon’s bed and sat atop Tom’s lap, facing him, straddling his
sitting body between her legs. She pulled his body forward using the tie, and kissed him hungrily.
She saw a triplet of eyes open wide in surprise, then relax to a half-closed state. She felt the demon
prince return the kiss. His tongue was soft and warm. Was it warmer than that of other boys? It had
to be, but Janna could not really know. Perhaps her bad girl reputation was greatly exaggerated -
she preferred to think she had earned different merit badges there - but Tom was her first.

Would he be able to tell? Well, she was sure Tom would be able to tell she wasn’t very good at
this, but perhaps she could blame it on the alcohol. She felt him pull out from the kiss and for a
second she felt worried. Was she bad enough at kissing he was getting bored? She saw his smile, a
single fang escaping the corner of his lips. Then she felt a hand pushing on her left shoulder and
another pulling on her right. In her dizziness, she realized what had happened only after she was
laying in the bed, Tom atop of her. She bit her lower lip.
“I think it might be better if I do the ravishing, after all,” Tom smiled at her. She had no objections to that. His hands left her shoulders to roam across the length of her arms, resting finally on her wrists, immobilizing her against the mattress. “So, I guess I really never did ask about you. Never had a boyfriend yet?”

Janna’s face flustered.

“Was it that obvious?” she asked, trying to not show her concern.

“And yet, you are the one coming onto me,” he continued, ignoring her question. “You get curiouser and curiouser,” Tom mused.

He lowered his face to Janna’s and kissed her again, his tongue dancing on her mouth. A hand left her left wrist and she could feel a single claw tracing a line on her neck, just above her chocker. On instinct, she broke the kiss and sought the finger with her mouth, using her now free hand to guide Tom’s own. He let her catch it and Janna sucked lightly on his finger, running her tongue around the digit, avoiding getting a cut from the sharp claw-like nail at the tip. She might be inexperienced, but she was sure she could make the difference with eagerness and imagination. The opportunity was too good to pass up, after all.

Janna did not believe in saving herself for a steady boyfriend, let alone for marriage. If she had done nothing like this before, it was only because she had never found a partner who was both game and hit her very particular type. Tom fit both categories. She was well aware that after spilling all the beans on her plan, this was probably her last date with the demon prince. Her excuse about making Star jealous was not likely to hold up now that he knew her whole plan. It was tonight or never. Seize the godforsaken moment and all that. When in hell, do as the sinners do.

“Heh, is there anything you are trying to tell me, Miss Ordonia?” Tom commented with an infuriating smirk.

“Yes,” she said, letting Tom take his finger out of her mouth. “That we are both overdressed for this party.”

That got her a double eyebrow rise in return. Tom let go of her remaining wrist, lifting that hand to rip the tie off his own neck. He then let jacket fall behind him.

“Wait, allow me,” asked Janna, as he started unbuttoning his shirt.

He leaned forward again and she began undoing the buttons, one by one. It was her first time undoing buttons from this angle, but that did not faze Janna in the slightest. She pick-pocketed for fun and undid complex knots with those fingers every other weekend, ridding Tom of his shirt was child’s play, even when partially under the influence.

She tried kissing his chest as she uncovered the flesh beneath the shirt. It was warm and soft, despite the firm muscles underneath. Tom was thin, but not entirely scrawny. He breathed heavily, either pleased by her actions or by the thoughts they probably evoked. Taking her cue from the demon’s earlier play around her neck and from what Star told her before, she ran her own nails along his abdomen. She pressed hard, noting that she did not seem to be able to hurt the fiend’s skin, even if she had wanted to do so. Thus, no need to hold back.

He laughed at her, “so, you are into a bit of pain?”

“Well, I know you are,” Janna observed.
She looked directly into his eyes, defiantly. She motioned him to lift his weight from her, so she could slide her dress over her head, without leaving her spot in the bed, under Tom. As the fabric covered her face, she felt a sharp nail trace the inside of her leg carefully, probably leaving a faint calculated scratch, stopping right before her underwear.

“Guilty,” she heard Tom reply.

She felt his eyes roam over her underwear clad body, a lacy black matching set. She knew there was not much to look at, at least in terms of the bust area, but then again, if Tom’s type was Star, she probably need not worry too much. He seemed pleased, at any rate. She felt a fingertip, not a claw, trace the front of her panties, pushing the fabric in slightly, damping it with her building wetness.

“I believe,” he said mockingly, “that I was given a preview of something.”

Janna blushed. But summoning all her courage, both natural and from the ethylic variety, she lifted her hands to undo the demon’s belt and pants buttons. He helped her slide the remaining clothes away and soon she was face to face with his hard purple member. Looking up at Tom, trying her best to put on a hungry lustful look, she proceeded to lick the tip with her outstretched tongue.

After a few moments, he began pushing forward, and she took it as her cue to take more and more of the thick shaft into her mouth.

It was a new experience for her, but not all that unintuitive based on porn or literary descriptions. In and out, a roll of the tongue here, a flick there. Whatever she was doing seemed to be working, because Tom was grunting and breathing heavily atop of her. He also was trashing around and thrusting himself towards her face from time to time, which proved challenging at times, but was also exciting in a way. There was something so obviously savage and primal to the demon prince’s movements now. Janna had been craving for dangerous and risqué, and getting your face fucked by a demon in hell certainly qualified for both.

Suddenly, a deliciously naughty thought crossed her mind, about something she once read about in a book. She pressed her left hand against the demon’s stomach, pushing him out of her mouth. She knew he could overpower her if he wished, but he responded to gesture by backing off willingly.

“Too much?” he asked with a grin.

She rolled her eyes at him. She took her right middle and index into her mouth and practically spit on them, then she got her other hand out of the way and resumed her earlier activities. Tom gladly obliged, pushing himself onto her welcoming lips once more.

She continued to work her tongue around the hell prince’s cock, but at the same time, she reached around with her wet fingers, placing a probing index directly between the fiend’s butt-cheeks. Tom’s eyes opened up again, glowing red. But his mouth made a circle of surprise, rather than a grimace of fear, and Janna took that as her cue to push forward, inserting a finger first and then the other into her date’s puckered asshole.

“By Baalzebûb below, you are filthy!” Tom cried, somehow making it sound like a compliment.

Feeling encouraged, she continued pumping him from the front as she penetrated him with her fingers from behind. He grunted and thrashed around until she felt him tense inside her mouth and around her fingers. In the last second, however, he pulled out from her, and began spurting wildly all over her chest, face and hair.

“You fucking asshole!” Janna felt the hot liquid smear her bra and muck up her hair. She ought to
have hated the sensation, she knew Tom hadn’t done that to be nice. It was probably his idea of a
joke: she was now literally filthy. Joke was on him, though, it gave her a thrill to feel soiled. “You
better not expect to get away with not returning the favor.”

Tom did not reply for a few seconds, he was panting, recovering from his explosive climax. Then
he looked at her and laughed. It was not a mean laugh after all, more of a surprised laugh. He
seemed to consider her words for a moment.

“You know what? I guess it is only fair...”

Slowly, he slid himself off from over her, ripping down her underwear and lowering his face until
she could feel his unnaturally warm breath in her sex. Then a wet hot flexible thing parted the lips
of her cunt apart, and she felt it dance among her folds. She felt something rush to her head
completely unrelated to the alcohol. As her wetness spread and her breath quickened, she felt his
movements become faster and bolder. His tongue at times danced right over her sensitive clit, and
at others went so deep in her that she felt something stretch inside her virgin pussy.

As she felt the wave of her pleasure begin to crest, Janna grabbed Tom’s horns with both hands and
crossed her legs around the back of his head. He continued as if nothing happened, except perhaps
for going even faster. With his head between her legs, he missed the malicious smirk that
accompanied her climaxing face. As she yelled in indulgent bliss, she blasted his mouth and face
with her wet messy ending.

“Sorry, guess I forgot to tell you I am a bit of a squirter,” she eventually told him, after she
recovered herself. ‘Payback, bitch,’ she thought to herself.

He coughed as he tried to respond. “Ugh. Ahg. Fuck you!”

“Don’t mind if you do,” she retorted.

He jumped at her. Soon his arms were on her wrists again and he had climbed atop of her with the
speed of a hungry animal, eyes red in supernatural fury.

“Wait, Tom!” she shouted, suddenly terrified. It was easy to be cocky when it was rhetorical
fucking, not so much when a demon in a furious trance was about to claim her by force.

“Yes?” he sounded exasperated, but to his credit, he held back.

“First, I am not exactly on the pill or anything. Dunno how it works with you, but, I think I am a bit
young to give birth to the antichrist or anything like that...” she began.

He chuckled, despite the situation.

“Not an issue. Demons do not produce life by nature. I mean, there are rituals, and there are also
some curses I could choose to put on you if we do this... I promise you an explanation at a better
time... but trust me, this is not about any of that. No long term harm will come to you from this, I
promise.” He sounded sincere, albeit impatient, as he rushed through the lengthy explanation.

“And, was there a second thing?”

“Yeah, sorry if this is lame, but... please be gentle, just this one time...”

“Sure, ok.”

Tom stood there unmoving for a few seconds, it made her slightly nervous. She had not wanted to
stop their power games short, but it was her first time, after all, and as much as she put a brave face
so far, she was truly quite scared. She wondered if the demon would find her request disappointing. But when he opened his eyes, they were normal again. He seemed calm and even gave her a gentle smile as he aligned himself with her own body and slowly pushed forward. Janna bit her lip. She felt a short sharp pain, and then a somewhat uncomfortable feeling as her walls stretched around the intruding object. As he pulled out, she felt the emptiness hurt almost as much. He entered again and it hurt a little bit less. Out again and even less. Soon the pain was gone and there was only the pleasurable sensation of his slow thrusts.

“I think... you can be rough now,” she eventually admitted, in an almost pleading tone.

Tom did as she asked, first gradually, methodically increasing the speed and the force behind his movements thrust after thrust. She felt his hands grip her shoulders from behind. Eventually, the calculated increases gave way to bestial fury, to clawing fingers and hungry plunges. She closed her legs around his waist and her arms around his back. She felt his hands roam her back looking for something. Looking for wings. She felt a bit sad about that, in a deep corner of her mind she could mostly push away. It didn’t matter right now. She felt her elation build up for a second time and soon nothing mattered but his grunts and her moans and the unholy bliss that raptured them.

Chapter End Notes

... you all thought I meant Starco when I said this had a smut scene, but it was I, Jantom!
It Takes Three to Tango

Chapter Summary

In which we deal with the aftermath of the previous night, an act of kleptomania sets up future pitfalls for our heroes, and unusual arrangements are discussed.

Chapter Notes

Not the threesome chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 07: It Takes Three to Tango

Continuity stardate: This chapter takes place the morning after the last one, meaning two days following the SvtFoE episode “Just Friends” (S02E20b). The story has now begun to diverge from the SvtFoE season 2 mainline in ways that have yet to be fully explained.

For the first time in months, Tom slept like an angel. Which, sure, theologically speaking, was all kinds of blasphemy. But, that morning at least, the demon didn’t care. Last night had been fun, and it had ended with, well, with a bang. Janna might not quite be Star Butterfly, Tom thought, but she certainly was a remarkable girl. She was interesting to talk to, shrewd in a way that kept even him on his toes, surprisingly adventurous in the bedroom given her previous lack of experience and, perhaps most important, she actually enjoyed, nay, desired, being with him.

Tom hadn’t noticed before just how much chasing Star around for over a year had wounded his ego. The indignity of two nights ago had just been the culmination of his parade of humiliations in trying to get the princess back.

Then again, Janna was not really in the same league as Star. The witch wannabe was certainly fun, but she was a step down from the magical princess, wasn’t she? So, was Tom settling? Was he giving up on what he wanted to be comfortable with what he had within reach?

That wasn’t like him. No, it wasn’t like him at all. Tom was used to getting what he wanted, sooner or later. Star could not be the sole exception. He would not allow it for her to be. He was sure eventually he would find a way to convince her to be with him.

But perhaps there was no harm in taking advantage of the company of the human girl for a while. She had pretty much told him that Star would date Marco now, and Janna was still willing, in theory, to go along with trying to make her friend jealous. Maybe he could still make that plan work in the long run. Let Star be with Marco for now, and he would date Janna instead. Eventually Star would realize what Tom already knew, that the two of them were better for each other than
their respective human lovers. Except, this way, he would also get to have his fun too, while he waited for the princess to understand the obvious.

Now that he thought of it, perhaps he and Janna could even go at it a second time before he took her back to the surface. He turned around, naked in his bed, expecting to see the aforementioned source of fun beside him. He was alone. She was gone.

Tom sought her with his mind, but quickly realized she was no longer within his domain. Finding a particular human within the hell under his rule was an easy feat for the demon prince, but those powers did not extend all the way back to Earth. Damn it! How dare the girl leave without telling him so? Wait. Actually, now that he thought of it, how had she even managed to get out of hell on her own?

He rubbed two fingers on his temple and counted to ten. This was certainly not ideal for his plans, but he really ought to stop letting every little setback set him off. He would find her again. At Star’s school, perhaps? Besides, it wasn’t as if it mattered too much if this had actually just been a one night thing. Janna had served her main purpose: she got him to de-stress and to feel a bit better about himself. Having her around to counterweight whatever Marco was to Star was just one of many ideas he could brainstorm now, given the basic insights he had gained the previous night.

Then Tom’s eyes noticed something about the glass case on the opposite wall from his bed. Inside of it, there were: a huge red ruby, a dragon skull, and an assortment of other smaller objects. He blinked. There was a large and conspicuously empty space besides the dead creature’s head. The Urn of Midra'Apep, an eldritch artifact older than the Great Pyramids of Giza or the Ancient Obsidian Temple in Mewni, was missing!

Tom’s vision turned red as he violently sat up on the bed. An instant after that, the entirety of his room exploded in flames as he cried out in burning rage, “Janna!!”

----

Unlike most days in the last few weeks, Jackie had slept terribly. She had found it extraordinarily hard to fall asleep last night, only to experience a restless slumber, full of disturbing dreams she couldn’t quite remember once awake. In the end, it was barely past sunrise when she decided to get out of bed. Usually, she slept in until late on weekends, and today was a Sunday, but she had given up on getting a proper night rest at this point. In any case, she knew that no amount of shut-eye would relieve her unease this morning. Only two things truly had any chance of calming her discomfort.

The first, and most important was talking to Marco. But that was still hours away. They had settled on brunch at a nearby diner, at 11:30 to give both of them a chance to sleep in and get ready without hurry. It was almost ironic that she wouldn’t need the extra time after all. Usually Marco was far more of a morning person than she was. Then again, Jackie thought, odds were he was actually sleeping in today, considering he had gone out last night. Would he be waking up with Star in his arms? The image made her feel... conflicted.

Jackie took a quick shower and dressed up in shorts and her favorite white and green t-shirt, getting only slightly more carefully made up than she did for school. She wanted to look good, of course, but it would be a bit silly to get all dolled up for brunch. Besides, she was not sure whatever she did now would hold up until then. If nothing else, her hair would be messed up. Fortunately, she had years of experience in making messy hair look good. She grabbed her skateboard, and her helmet, and headed out.

Skateboarding was the only other thing that had any chance of calming her nerves. So that was
what she planned on doing until she got a chance to talk to Marco. ‘And Star,’ she mentally added. He had not called her last night, which meant one of two things: either Marco had decided that Jackie was crazy and was no longer interested in talking to her, or, he had followed her instructions, and that meant...

“If she says no, or the date ends early, please call me. If not, bring her tomorrow,” she had said near the end. Marco had tried to say something in protest, but she had cut him off, she didn’t even remember with what. It felt surreal. Like the whole conversation had all been one of her anxious dreams. But no, she reminded herself, it had happened two nights ago, and it had been no dream at all.

Why had she pushed Marco to ask Star out? What could she possibly have to gain from that? Jackie frowned and kicked back the pavement, picking up speed. It had hurt so badly when Marco called Star’s name. She had been angry and wounded. Marco had been apologetic and guilty.

“Marco, what the hell dude?! I know I asked you about Star before, but yelling her fucking name while you nut in me is not exactly what I was hoping for!”

“Jackie, I am so sorry, I really am, I don’t know what came over me... it was weird, it just popped into my mind... I swear... and God, that sounds even worse aloud...”

He had said he hadn’t been imagining Star, not on purpose at least. That he had somehow simply seen her face just jump into his mind. Jackie didn’t know what to believe, but he had seemed genuinely confused and contrite. She knew, when she looked into his eyes, that he felt terrible about it, perhaps worse than she herself did. She was hurt - that the reflex had been subconscious didn’t make it less painful - but she found it hard to stay mad at her boyfriend. It took them several minutes of awkward silences and wounded looks to get to the crux of the issue.

“Alright Marco, say I believe it that thinking of Star just now was a brain-fart. Are you telling me, in all honesty, that you do not like her?”

“I... I don’t know... I mean... maybe, maybe I do like Star in a way too, but Jackie... I choose to be with you. I mean, if you will still have me after, well, after just now...”

Jackie was going steeply downhill now, approaching the upwards slanted porch of a house. The contrarian sixty-degree angle with the rest of the road made it her favorite natural ramp. Skateboarding was indeed clearing her mind, removing the non-essential from yesterday’s conversation: the unbearable pauses, the hemming and hawing, the hesitant guarded phrases, their mutual attempts to dance around the issue.

“Marco, I think you can love more than one person. I mean, at the same time. And... and... I think you might be in love with Star...”

Denials, at first. But only at first.

“I... I don’t know... I mean... maybe, maybe I do like Star in a way too, but Jackie... I choose to be with you. I mean, if you will still have me after, well, after just now...”

She remembered pausing a long time before replying to that. It wasn’t that she didn’t know what she wanted to say, and it certainly wasn’t to prolong Marco’s obvious terror and guilt. She had wanted to hug him, to reassure him that of course she wanted him. But that would only have pushed the true issue further down the road. She had needed all of her courage to force herself to make her
next suggestion instead.

“So, Marco... what if you didn’t have to choose?”

She felt the wheels lose their final contact with the ground. She dropped her own body low while the board took her meters into the air. She felt the adrenaline pumping and her heartbeat accelerating. She thought of Marco, waking up beside Star, relaxed, happy. Her beloved Marco, basking in the morning afterglow after spending the night with the princess. Jackie felt elated, in her mind, as she flew through the air. For a moment that thought was nothing but beautiful to her. She wanted him to be as happy as he could be, and she knew Star could be part of that happiness.

Then she felt the impact. She shifted her weight to avoid falling off from the board as it touched the pavement once more. Back down to earth, Jackie had an ugly afterthought, “but, what if it is me that is not part of his happiness? What if he decides he doesn’t want me after that?”

----

Jackie finally went into the diner at 11:20, taking the most isolated table she could find, placing her skateboard against the wall and her helmet on the table. She had gone around the block more than once before, decided it was too early for her to come in and done lap after lap on her board. Hours of tracing the streets of Echo Creek had helped her relax significantly, yet nothing could truly remove the knot in her stomach, not until she had talked to her boyfriend. She ordered a vanilla milk shake and spent the time fiddling with her phone. There was a message from Janna, ‘Yo. Come to my place by 5. Got something wicked cool to show you...’

She was about to reply, when she saw them walking down the street. Marco was getting there a few minutes early, and he had truly brought Star. She felt her throat getting dry and quickly drank some more milkshake. They looked so happy, smiling at each other and chatting loudly. Oh god, they were holding hands! What had she just gotten into?

Just before they came in through the door, she noticed Marco saying something to Star, who quickly let go of his hand, blushing slightly. He came in first, his eyes scanning the place until they met Jackie’s. “Hi Jackie,” he greeted her, almost apologetically. He had the most adorable nervous smile.

“Yo Diaz!” she replied, flashing him her own best smile. She waved her hand at both of them. “Hey Star! How have you been?” she added, in a hopefully casual tone.

“Oh, hey Jackie,” Star beamed at her. “You know, doing well!” Jackie reflexively raised an eyebrow at Star and the princess laughed nervously. “I mean, eh, how about you?”

“Same old, same old,” she lied.

The two other teens sat together on the opposite side of the table, and Jackie tried not to read too much into it. Marco was visibly tense, he almost looked like a rabbit about to bolt from the whole scene. Star was probably doing the same thing she was, trying to appear casual despite feeling everything but calm. The mewman was her usual bubbly self, except her eyes kept darting from Jackie to Marco and all over the place, and she occasionally had a weird twitch in her right eye. The two of them kept the small talk going as they ordered breakfast, while Marco just sat there in tense uncomfortable silence. They eventually got scrambled eggs for her, sunny-side up for Marco, and a huge stack of pancakes for their resident magical princess.

“So...” Star began, once they were all eating, seemingly unable to bear it anymore. Jackie swore she saw Marco flinch slightly. She waited a few moments for the other girl to finish the sentence,
but it soon became apparent that she was expecting her to lead this conversation. Well, Jackie imagined it was only fair.

She looked at Marco, just to be sure. He nodded.

“So,” Jackie echoed. “I assume you two went out last night? How was it?” she asked. Maybe she should have asked Marco to talk separately beforehand, rather than put them both in the spot like this, but well, this was going to be awkward either way, for all three of them, and she wanted to see both of their reactions first.

“Jackie...” Marco tried to say something, but seemed to stop midway.

“It was amazing,” Star said. She looked at Marco, smiling nervously, “at least for me. Thank you, Jackie!”

“Eh? Me?” Jackie replied. The princess’ candor and strangely heartfelt gratitude had taken her by surprise. She was not sure the later was well placed, in the end it was Marco that had taken his roommate on a date, Jackie had at most gotten out of the way for that to happen, no more.

“Well, I mean, he said you told him to ask me out, so, if you hadn’t, then he wouldn’t have, right? So, well, so thank you!” Star continued, she stared down at her pancakes. “And well, I don’t know how this works. I think it is an Earth thing and you two will have to explain it to me, because I don’t think we have it in Mewni. I don’t know if I get to, you know, borrow Marco again? Some sort of concubine type deal? Or if it was a one time thing? Or if I now need to, like, joust you for him? Or whatever else. But either way... thank you!”

‘A concubine type deal’? The Earth girl was surprised the future Queen of Mewni would even consider that kind of role, even if she probably didn’t mean it the way Jackie had interpreted. Also, hopefully Star was not serious on the jousting thing either!

Jackie wasn’t sure if she had imagined it, but she swore she saw a thin teardrop fall on the pancakes. Before she herself could say anything, Marco’s arm was around the princess’ shoulder, as he hugged her close. “Star...” he finally seemed to find his words, “it was amazing.” He shot Jackie a sheepish look. “I mean... you both are amazing.”

The human girl smiled back at her boyfriend, assuming he still chose to be so, then took a deep breath. Clearly her own hang ups around talking about this plainly were making it more confusing than it needed to be, for everyone involved. Well, time to come clean. “Star, this is not an Earth thing. I think, I think it is a me thing, or, maybe, hopefully, an us thing. All three of us,” she explained the best she could.

“As for how it works, well, I think we all decide that. I mean, Marco and you could decide you want to only date each other, exclusively, and well, I am prepared to cope with that, if that’s the case,” she looked sadly at her adorable and kind boyfriend. She was truly prepared to let go, if that made him happy, but she definitely didn’t want to. She knew it would break her heart in two. “Or, you could decide this is too weird for you, and we could go back to where we were before the weekend, with Marco and I dating, and you could find something less... complicated. But, what I think I would want, personally, is to still be Marco’s girlfriend and then, well, if you two want, you can keep dating too, and whenever you two decide to be boyfriend and girlfriend as well, then I guess Marco will have two girlfriends and we will have a time-share of sorts...” Jackie laughed. Her bottled up nervousness seemed to all go into that laughter, because it began as a nervous giggle, turned into a happy chuckle and ended with her in a relaxed smile. Whatever they replied now, whatever they thought of it, she had finally gotten it out her chest: her weirdness, and her wild suggestion. “Hopefully you both don’t think I am nuts?”
“Jackie, I think you are crazy...” Star replied, looking down. Then she lifted her head to look at Jackie and the Earth girl could have sworn she had never seen someone smile so brightly. Wait, was Star actually, literally, glowing? “... crazy awesome! I mean, there are a lot of weird things about Earth, you know? Parking meters, electric lights, football, chicken with spicy chocolate, that cereal with the tiny marshmallows!” she actually counted with her fingers as she spoke. “They are all weird, but they are also awesome. And, ok, you say this is not an usual Earth thing, and I hear that, but it is still weird-awesome, and I love weird-awesome. It might be the most weird-awesome thing I have ever heard. So, what I am saying is, I am in. I am in all the way... co-girlfriend?”

Star sincere and untroubled reaction made Jackie smile in return. She knew that if someone would ever be ok with her own weirdness, it had to be Star, so she was lucky it was her whom Marco fancied. Well, that settled it! Or, actually, that almost settled it, there was one more person involved in this whole arrangement, after all. “Marco, penny for your thoughts?”

“Well... Jackie, are you asking what I think about a plan that involves me dating the two most incredible girls I know, simultaneously?” Marco asked with a grin. “I think I must be dreaming. I think there is no way I could ever be this absurdly undeservedly lucky. I think every guy at school is going to hate my guts. I think I am for sure going to mess this up somehow, but even knowing that I can’t say anything but yes!” She hadn’t seen him that excited since the Love Sentence concert, and maybe not even then. “One thing, though, if either of you ever have some other guy you like, then, well, we should talk about it, and have the same... deal... apply. I would feel like such a jerk otherwise...”

“Hehe, sure, sounds fair, dude. But I don’t have anyone else in mind right now,” she replied.

“Well...” Star seemed weirdly uncomfortable for a second, a hand rubbing the right side of her neck. “No one else for me now, either.”

“Well, so now that that is settled,” Jackie began, directing a devilish grin towards Star. “How would you describe Marco in bed? Wouldn’t mind hearing a second opinion!” She honestly wouldn’t, and she figured out if Star was truly so thankful, then she had earned the right of making the princess squirm a little bit.

“Jackie!” Marco protested, turning beet red. Speaking of people she loved making squirm.

“Eh... I’ll have to get back to you on that one,” Star finally spoke, after a few moments of shocked silence. Jackie looked back confused. She had expected Star to maybe not answer her question, of course. But it didn’t sound like she was avoiding giving an answer, it sounded more like she was saying she didn’t have one.

“We haven’t... I mean, we didn’t... you know...” Marco started. It was the cutest thing how he couldn’t even fucking say it. “We got dinner together, and we danced, and well... we kissed, more than once,” he almost whispered that last part. “I guess we also sort of cuddled a bit. But, I guess I wasn’t sure, what exactly was or wasn’t fair game there. You said to ask her out on a date, and is not like we did anything beyond kiss on our first date...”

Honestly, they could have had, Jackie thought to herself, if Marco had pushed for it. Well, and if they hadn’t had to save Star from a bird-man midget in a clown suit, a spider the size of a large dog, and a literal army of rats. “Fair enough, dude,” she replied. It was actually a bit of a relief in a way. Not so much because she would have been mad if Marco had slept with Star, but because it was good to know that even out on a date with another girl, he was still thinking about her feelings. It made this all so much easier. “It is actually very sweet of you. But, well, from now on, you two officially have my blessing, alright?”
Had Star just silently mouthed ‘thank you’ at her? Jackie laughed. Star quickly followed suit, and then, nervously, Marco joined them.

“So, Jackie, Star, clarification: how much should I say of this at school?” Marco asked. “Not that I want to brag or anything... I mean, unless I do get to brag?”

Jackie rolled her eyes, sweet guy or not, still a guy. She thought it out for a moment. “Well, I mean, it’s not going to be a big secret or anything. I don’t think that would be fair to Star. But I rather you not brag too much, school rumors are going to be a pain to deal with either way, no need to make it worse...”

They discussed the details for the next few minutes. They would keep it reasonably discreet, not involving anyone else without talking it first with the other two, etc. It was surprising how natural the conversation seemed to flow from there between the three of them, even Marco. Soon they all seemed to decide that it was enough of that and just naturally switched to other topics. Marco and Star ended up telling Jackie about the Bounce Lounge and something called a Goblindog. They talked until long after they had finished their food and paid. Star seemed to be trying to reciprocate Jackie’s opening of her relationship with Marco to her, by sort of inviting her into their friendship. It was a bit like what she had been doing the day of the concert. Except this time, it seemed to Jackie like the air between them was finally clear, no big weight on her chest bothering her anymore.

“So, I kinda told Janna I’d hang out with her later today,” Jackie said eventually, cutting short a discussion about the virtues and vices of the Mewni Game of Flags, “and I think I am going to have to get a nap before that if I am going to be awake enough to handle whatever she is up to. So, how about I head home now and give you the rest of the afternoon on your own? I am sure there are plenty of things the two of you want to... talk out today, before getting back to school for the week.” She flashed them both a conspiratorial smile as she got up of her seat and fastened her helmet.

“Wait, Jackie, one thing first,” Marco also got up. He ran his hand through the back of his hair as he got closer to her. They stared into each other’s eyes for a moment. “Are you absolutely sure you are ok with all of this?”

“More than ok, Marco...” Jackie replied. “We can talk more about it later, but dude, believe me, this conversation went so much better than I expected.”

“Jackie, you are awesome,” Marco stated, matter-of-factly. He leaned forwards and they kissed. It was a short kiss, but Jackie felt herself blush. It gave her... reassurance. She glanced at Star, the princess gave her a brief nervous smile and a nod.

“You are pretty awesome yourself, Diaz, and I know people here who can back me up on that,” she joked, winking at Star. They said their goodbyes again, and she walked out of the door, jumped on her skateboard and felt like she was flying without even leaving the ground.

----

“So, do I get one of those too?” Star asked eventually.

Marco sat down beside her, wrapped his arm around her, and kissed her for a long while. Out of the corner of her eye, Star noticed that one of the cashiers was giving the boy a thumbs up.

----
“So, how does it feel to go from Safe Kid to playboy extraordinaire?” Star teased the boy beside her. They were both back home, sitting on her bed, in her room. Her heart beat fast. Then again, Star’s heart always beat fast, and this was some fine excited beating, albeit of a different sort than usual.

“Honestly, Star, it’s like I said this morning, I still don’t believe it. Can’t wrap my head around you two being ok with this,” Marco replied, seriously. “Are you sure this works for you, Star? I can’t even believe it works for Jackie and well, it was her idea, not yours…”

“Marco, would you have asked me out yesterday if this didn’t work for Jackie?”

She awaited his response, knowing she would not get it. Eventually, she smiled and continued, “I see. Then it has to work for me too, doesn’t it? Besides, Jackie really is pretty awesome, and you like her, Marco, you’ve had a crush on her since forever. Pretty sure I don’t want to be the person that gets in between that, I never wanted to be. This way I don’t have to, and I still get you for myself too!”

“Marco, would you have asked me out yesterday if this didn’t work for Jackie?”

“Marco! I am sure,” she responded annoyed. How many times was he going to make her say it? It was worse than Tom! At least the demon didn’t treat Star like he was shocked she might be interested in sex! Ok, that was bullshit. This was a million times better than Tom. The fact that she could even look back at two nights ago and laugh rather than crumble in guilt and disgust surprised Star, but then again, it was hard to feel bad with Marco under her like that. “Don’t be the Safe Kid, Marco! Be my Wild Man…”

He blinked twice, then smiled at her. “Alright, Star,” he replied. He caught her by the shoulders and, before she knew it, he had rolled her around on the bed, placing himself on top. She felt his hands roam her legs through the fabric of her purple striped tights and then the pressing of his lips against her neck. It was not dancer-Marco, she noted, it was still her bestie being his usual methodical self, but he also felt leagues more confident and more skilled than the night of his first time with Jackie. Apparently he had learned a thing or two in the intervening weeks with his girlfriend, and Star found herself surprised that the thought did not bother her much. It helped that she was being the main beneficiary now, as the kisses in her neck trailed lower and lower until they
reached the collar of her green dress. She gasped, delighted. Marco frowned.

“Star, actually... I just realized, my parents are downstairs,” he seemed conflicted. “Maybe we can still do a bit more, but we have to keep it quiet.”

“Oh,” Star blushed, suddenly uncomfortable. She had forgotten about Mr. and Mrs. Diaz. They had been out of the house so often these last few days, and they were so often ok with the weird magic stuff the two teens got to on a daily basis, that Star had pretty much forgotten about the risk of being overheard. But, she realized, no matter how cool Marco’s parents were, it was very unlikely that they would be alright with the two of them having loud sex with them on the house. She felt herself frown.

“Marco, I don’t want to be quiet...” she thought about it for a moment, “...get the scissors. I know a place where we won’t have to worry about being loud at all!”

It was Marco’s turn to blush, and nod at her. “Sure, Star. I’ll get them from my room. But... man, I kinda wanted to...” he trailed off, nervously. “Well, I wanted it to be in your room.”

“You did?” Star felt surprised and somehow flattered at once.

“Well, Star, this is going to sound kind of silly but,” Marco trailed off, as he moved away from her so that he was sitting in the bed besides the resting princess. “This place is intimate and familiar, and absolutely you. It brings up so many memories, and, in the last few days, whenever I thought of you... you know, that way... I pictured it all here.” He looked around. “Besides, and this may be a wrong thing to wish for but, I guess I also kinda want you to associate this place with a memory of me as well...”

Star laughed at him. “Marco, memories of you are what I associate this place with already! It is my room in your home, and you have been here more than anyone else by far...” Well, maybe not if you counted Glossaryck, but Star felt that wasn’t the same at all. “But, I get what you mean, I would also want it to be here... wait!”

The Mewni girl jumped out from the bed and grabbed her wand. She was Star Butterfly after all, wasn’t she? If this room was what they wanted, and her bed was where Marco wanted her and she wanted him, then this room is what they would have!

“Defensive Gate Summoning Spell!” she shouted, pointing her wand to the door. A portcullis and a giant padlock appeared in front of the door. Marco jumped, surprised.

“Star?” he said, looking at her quizzically.

“Shh, let me concentrate,” she admonished him. This next part was tricky. It was not something she had practiced before, and it had better work the first time, they had already interrupted things for too long if you asked the mewman princess. “Sound-Proof Parent-Repelling Anti-Clam-Jamming Glitter Bubble!!”

A wave of pink light shot out of her wand in every direction around them, stopping right before it expanded beyond the walls of the room. It lingered there, a thin layer of bright pink magical energy with shimmering specks of gleaming dust interspaced through its soap-bubble-like interface. She waited a few moments, making sure the spell held and then flashed Marco a victorious grin.

“No way that is a real spell,” Marco commented.

“It is now,” Star retorted, sitting back on the bed and leaving her wand back on the bedside table. “Now, where were we?”
She barely had time to say that when she felt Marco kissing her lips again, his hunger for her quickly getting her back into the mood as well. She closed her eyes and focused on the sensations of the kiss. Moments after, she felt his hands roaming under her skirt, pushing the entire dress up. She lifted her arms to help the boy relieve her of her clothing. Marco broke off the kiss to push the dress entirely off of her, and she reluctantly let go of the contact.

He stood up from the bed, calmly taking her dress and laying it on a nearby chair, then headed back towards her and begun removing her boots. Star felt self-conscious, exposed in her underwear in front of her bestie. He smiled at her and looked her up and down, causing her cheekmarks to glow. “Marco... what are you doing?”

“Making memories,” he replied simply. He sat down again beside her and kissed her closest cheek. It was but a chaste peck, but he quickly began trailing down from there, through her neck, to her shoulder, down the strap of her bra... Star shuffled around and sat on her knees, so that she was facing Marco, with both of them atop the bed. She pulled her chin up and kissed him on the lips again, then began pushing his characteristic red hoodie off of him, and then his shirt up. They broke the kiss and she lifted the gray t-shirt over his head, throwing it towards the far side of the mattress.

She let her gaze linger over every inch of that chocolate-milk colored torso. Then pushed Marco back once more, getting on top and roaming her hands and mouth all over the boy’s exposed skin. He smelled good, and tasted even better. She heard him breathing heavily and felt something poking at her through his pants and her underwear. She pressed and wiggled on it, feeling the wetness build up in her crotch.

Marco’s hands reached behind her, and with a swift movement opened the clasp of her bra. She chuckled, knowing full well why Marco would never have any problem removing that from her. “Practiced that one a lot?” she asked, innocently.

“Oh... ah...” there it was, nervous Marco, Star smiled inwardly but kept her expression neutral.

“With Jackie, I mean,” she lied. She was being mean teasing him like this but, unfortunately for Marco, it was way too much fun.

“Ah... yes, I guess,” Marco replied, visibly relieved.

“Well, Marco,” she raised herself up until she was sitting on his lap. “I know I don’t have as much as Jackie does, ok? so... hopefully this is not too... underwhelming,” she said nervously, as she removed the straps from her shoulders and let the bra fall on the bed.

The bra in question was an A cup, and even then, when she and Janna had gone shopping for it, the dark haired girl had called it ‘aspirational’ in her case. She truly hoped it wouldn’t be a disappointment for the boy, considering how much more developed his actual girlfriend was.

He stared at her, silently. Star felt the heat on her face as she turned red with embarrassment, “Come on, Marco, say something!”

“You look... amazing,” he pulled himself up and kissed her left puffy nipple briefly, then opened his mouth to easily take the whole mound of flesh into it.

Star felt him suck, and kiss, and flick his tongue at her chest. She felt the heat build between her legs and let out a long moan, thankful for the shiny bubble around them. Marco had begun alternating between sides as he hungrily devoured her chest. If Star had any remaining doubts her bestie liked that part of her, they were quickly put to rest.
His hands gripped her back hard. It was nothing like Tom’s clawed fingers, though, and even if Star could feel his roughness, it was not as if he could hurt her. For a magical princess, she was built of pretty strong stuff. In most places, at least. She winced, however, as Marco accidentally grabbed one of her wings. “Ouch, careful there... those are... sensitive,” she protested, briefly, and Marco’s hand quickly let go.

“Sorry, Star,” he said, lifting his head from her chest long enough to look at her in the eye and make sure she was ok. “Guess Jackie doesn’t have those,” he commented sheepishly. Star raised an eyebrow as she looked back at him.

Despite the brief mistake, the boy continued his ministrations towards her front, pleasuring her nubs with his eager tongue, while keeping his hands on her remaining breast and on the side of her body. Then, very carefully, a finger began probing the outline of her left wing. After a few seconds, another started tracing the right one. She felt her breath quicken and a whimper escape her lips. Marco seemed to be taking cues from her sounds and she made a point of being very vocal with her wordless moans. The boy rapidly mastered stimulating her upper back just as much as her upper front and the combined sensations were driving Star crazy.

“Maaaarco,” she moaned. He took that as his cue to try even harder. Time seemed to stretch forever as he kept softly playing with her wings and licking her breasts. It was very much unlike with Tom, who had passed through those areas mostly as stops on his way to the next stage, or as a means to warm up Star for what he really wanted. Marco seemed to enjoy taking his time there, slowly kindling her sensations for what felt like hours; if not on the clock, then at least inside her head. She whimpered and moaned and grunted, and at some point she felt a powerful but brief shudder. Even after it passed through her, she wasn’t sure that was what she thought it was. It had not been a particularly strong one, but... had she just came from only having her wings and nipples pleasured?

Either way, what she knew for a fact was that this was driving her horny out of her own mind! “Marco! Stop,” she said hoarsely, surprising the boy who seemed for a moment to be trying to figure out what he had done wrong. “My turn!”

She pushed herself down and almost ripped the pants from him, barely taking the time to unbutton them, pulling the boxers at the same time and pushing it all carelessly on the floor. She pulled her own soggy underwear down and discarded it with equal inattention. Star looked at her bestie’s hard long thick member and licked her lips. She felt like she was in the throes of Mewberty all over again. She needed the boy, particular, singular, boy.

“Star? Are you all... oooohhh!” Marco shouted as the princess practically slammed her mouth on his cock and began to slurp messily on it. In a way it was weird, that she had been so methodical and careful when imagining this while blowing Tom, but now that it was the actual boy she liked all the technique gave way to an unquenchable savage thirst. She was thirsty for Marco, for what she wanted to suck out of him now. She wanted him to explode in her mouth, and only part of it was wanting the boy to feel good. Marco didn’t seem to mind in the least, however, and quickly peaked from her wild attention. “Star, I am about to...” he grunted.

She barely heard him, and did not stop until a few moments after she felt the first shot hit the back of her throat. She drank it like it was the sweetest milkshake she could imagine. In reality, she knew it tasted nothing like that. But, she told herself, she needed this, she wanted this, to wash away the taste of Tom.

“Marco! I need you, please,” Star begged, opening her legs to him, still in a dazzled heat. A part of her was burning with embarrassment at the side of her she was now showing her best friend. But it
was too much: the months of pent up desire, the feeling that this somehow absolved her from the Tom thing, Marco’s earlier prolonged slow-boiling teasing!

“Star... I kinda cannot do that right now,” Marco replied, with visible regret. “I sort of need a few minutes after... well, after what just happened. But... I can do this,” he added, rolling around on the bed until he was laying face down, with his head almost between Star’s legs. She felt his smooth flat tongue describe a broad trail up her cunt, parting her lips as it went. She pushed her feet forward and arched back, until she was laying down comfortably. Marco then began to eat her out in earnest.

Once again he was careful and methodical, but she could also feel his desire in every flick and movement. He began slow, but soon seemed to realize that was not necessary at all, as Star was already drenched and ready from their earlier acts. She felt him lap her up rapidly, his tongue moving all around her folds. Every so often, his mouth sucked on her clit and she gasped loudly and lustfully. It took no time at all for her to reach her peak, and this time there was no doubt about it. She exploded with a loud shameless howling moan.

“Fuck, Marco! That was incredible,” Star finally said.

“I just hope that bubble thing is really soundproof,” Marco joked. “Otherwise we are in trouble.”

Star blushed. Her climax had brought her back somewhat from her altered state, and now she felt unsure about it. That had been a bit too weird and bit too wild.

“You were too, Marco, super amazing!” she smiled at him a huge grin. “But, well, I guess even I am going to have to look at my bestie a little bit differently, now that I know he can do... that, to me...”

“I see what you mean,” Marco seemed to ponder. “I guess I also just got a lot more memories than I expected. But, is that bad? Or is it good?”

“Honestly, I guess it is...” Star begun.

“...Amazing!” they both said at the same time. They laughed.

“Hugs!” shouted Star, and they shared a brief friendly hug. Star found it strangely reassuring. They were still best besties. It was just that they were also something else now as well.

“You know, Star? This is seriously the weirdest relationship,” Marco commented.

“It is about to get even weirder,” Star observed.

“Oh really?” Marco asked. “How?”

“Well, for one, I kinda still need you to fuck me,” Star announced nonchalantly. It was hard feeling embarrassed about that, considering how she had just acted before. However, Marco reacted to it by becoming quite flustered still, which only amused Star further.

“Oh,” Marco managed to mutter, turning red. “Sure, of course, if you are still up for it...” He
walked up from the bed and retrieved his pants from the floor, producing a wrapper from the left pocket.

“Well, someone was prepared,” Star joked. “Nice one, Safe Kid!” She winked at him.

“I mean, someone had to be,” Marco retorted. “Unless you have a spell for that?”

“Well, Marco, those sort of spells are a bit like... well, like healing spells, I guess,” she confessed honestly. “Not my forte. Also... super uncomfortable to read through with Glossaryck looking over your shoulder, let me tell you...” she grimaced. Although, truth be told, she missed the annoying little magic man. She frowned, casting aside the thought for a less inappropriate time.

“So, Star, before we get to it, I kinda want to ask... is this going to be a first for you?” Marco interrupted her thoughts as he sat back in the bed. “Is not that I want to pry, or anything, but well, just want to know if I should be extra careful...”

“Not my first,” Star confessed, her frown deepening as she thought of two days before: the hard cement, the wood splinters. Tom had not been careful in the least. He had not even asked, or cared. Sure, Star Butterfly was much tougher than almost anyone knew. She took punches and bites and fire breath from monsters about as often as most people took baths and, as it turned out, her first time hadn’t been particularly painful to her. At least, not physically. But still, she appreciated Marco asking.

“Tom?” he ventured. So much for not prying, Marco, Star thought, feeling a bit annoyed.

“Yeah...” she answered in a grim monotone.

“Well, I supposed you two dated for a long while. So it is not too surprising.” Marco commented, and she did not try to correct him. “Anyways, I am glad this won’t hurt for you, then.” He smiled at her. Star felt relieved he did not judge her about Tom, even knowing he might still react differently if he knew the entire story.

She guided him atop her in the bed and they began kissing passionately. She felt his hands on her breasts and quickly lowered one of her own to begin pumping him to full mast. It was surprising how little time it took them to go from two friends joking at each other to two lovers ready for one another. Marco smiled at her as he used one hand to aim himself at her entrance, and slowly thrust into her. Star gasped and tightly gripped the boy’s back.

Marco was slowly going in and out of her, and Star felt as if back in the dream, floating on multi-color clouds. Yet somehow, this was even better. She felt her own arousal build up with every deep thrust, and at the same time, she slowly became aware of something else: a growing feeling that matched her own from the distance. She closed her eyes and felt it. It was like there was a big ball of light floating inside infinite darkness and it beat to the rhythm of her heart, expanding more and more as her arousal increased. But there was also another ball of light, seemingly smaller if only because it was further away, but she could see it beat and grow too. “Maaarco...”

He grunted in response. “Already, Star?” he asked.

“No...” she replied, panting slightly. It wasn’t that, not yet. “But, Marco, let me try something...”

She held his arms by the wrist and pushed herself up, deliberately tipping both of them around, rolling them so that she was now on top. She had tried to be as gentle as she could, while still not pushing Marco out of her. Then, she began lowering herself up and down on Marco’s cock. She closed her eyes, and began timing herself to the rhythms of the more distant light. She heard Marco
gasp and his breath quicken. She smiled.

She felt his hands roam her chest, and then move to her back to caress her wings. Star moaned with abandon, but quickly focused back on the lights inside her mind. The princess barely paid attention to the sickly looking green mist that begun to form and flow between the two spheres. It didn’t matter, she knew the distant one was Marco. Marco’s desire. Marco’s arousal. She could guide herself by it, she could feel his pleasure.

Soon she didn’t need to close her eyes and see the lights anymore, she felt his sensations as well as her own with every time she impaled herself on him. She went deep when he wanted deep and fast when he wanted fast. She knew he was about to explode moments before he even tried to warn her, “Star...”

“Shh. I know,” she looked directly at his eyes. She slowed down, dragging it along, confidently keeping the boy at the very brink, then stopping to let him fall down from it. As soon as she felt his disappointment in her heart, she began moving again, deep and fast, slowing again as he approached climax. She was barely able to keep herself from ending things every time, her own build up quickly reaching the limit, but she made it into a challenge. She knew it would be worth it. Time after time she took them to the edge of the precipice, and back again.

“Oh god, Star, please...” Marco shouted. She grinned at him, and with a wink began going at full speed again. This time she did not stop, she let herself go completely. Her own desire exploded just an instant ahead of Marco’s. Her moans mixed with his grunts and soon she felt him twitching and pumping inside of her. Eventually, she fell to his side, exhausted.

They lay there for a while in silence. Star couldn’t believe her luck. Somehow, she wasn’t sure exactly why, she was able to feel what Marco felt, at least when they were both doing this. Was that what had happened two nights ago, when she had felt - maybe even seen - him and Jackie together when she was with Tom under the bridge? How was that even possible? Either way, it gave her an advantage, the princess thought, and without thinking, she asked a selfish question. “So, Marco, was that better than Jackie?”

She felt horrible the moment the words left her lips. Jackie had been nothing but kind to her that day, and here she was, thinking about using sex and magic weirdness to, what? Out-compete her for Marco’s affections? Why did she even need to ask Marco to compare? And, what if he still said he preferred Jackie? She had been his girlfriend for months now, after all.

The boy said nothing. He didn’t even seem to acknowledge the question. The sickening part was, that was what she expected Marco to do if she had been right. She shook her head, her own selfishness was now making her feel miserable, when she should be happy, basking in the after-glow of the moment she had dreamed of for so long. She had been so stupid!

Wait! Dreamed of? That was it! ‘A dark spell powered by lust’ Star recalled Hekapoo’s words. She remembered the green thread between her and older Marco that had appeared when Hekapoo had “inspected” her. Green like the mist between the light spheres, green like dark magic, green like the Seeing Eye spell!

This was not good. Well, it had been good so far, for her, but there was something ominous about a dark lingering magical connection. She wasn’t one to think too deeply about how her spells worked, but even Star knew enough to realize that somehow casting dark magic you did not fully understand was the sort of thing you ought to worry about, especially a spell that seemed to last weeks at a time.

A pair of arms closing around her interrupted her reflection, as Marco drew the princess into a tight
embrace. “Star, I love you!” he said, and the edifice of her thoughts collapsed like a sandcastle.

Chapter End Notes

Ladies and gentlemen, the Starco has landed! Surely this can't but mean happily ever after now.... right? ;)


Chapter Summary

In which undead kings rise once more, an evil god is set free, and apocalyptic circumstances set the stage for some people to cast a look at their more personal demons.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: Those tags on the fic about Underage, BDSM, and Bad BDSM Etiquette, are not there for decoration. I'd self-flagellate in penitence for writing this sort of smut, but that might end up being counter-productive. If not your cup of tea, skip the final scene ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 08: You Set the Snakes Loose

Continuity stardate: This chapter takes place two nights after the SvtFoE episode “Just Friends” (S02E20b). The story has now begun to diverge from the SvtFoE season 2 mainline with stakes both personal and cosmic.

“Space unicooorn... Soaring through the stars... Delivering the rainboooows all around the wooworld!”

Star felt her heavy eyelids stubbornly refuse to open even as the song labored to jolt her awake. She was only vaguely aware of Marco jumping up behind her, rushing to get out of her bed, scrambling around the messy room searching for his phone. She felt really groggy, and a peek out of her window told her it was the middle of the night. “Uh. Marco?”

He didn’t reply, and the ringtone stopped before he could find the blasted device. Star felt herself begin to fall asleep again, as she heard Marco rummaging through his discarded pants.

“Star! Wake up!!” he yelled suddenly, in an unnerved tone, jolting her back awake scant seconds after she had resolved to doze off again. “Get dressed! We need to go, now!”

The princess did not understand what the fuss was about, but if it had her bestie this worried, it must indeed be important. She forced herself to open her eyes and sit up, then reached around for her wand, just in time to see Marco smash head first against the pink shimmering bubble that still surrounded the middle of her bedroom.

“Star!” he complained. “Take it down, quickly! The scissors are in my room!”
She didn’t even ask, not before she dismissed both of her spells, dropping down her sound-proof shield as well as the lock on the door. But as Marco darted towards the now unlocked entrance, she begun to feel something was indeed horribly wrong, and she did not want to be left in the dark about it. “Marco! What’s happening?”

He tossed her his phone at her as he ran out of her room. She unlocked it. Two missed calls, four text messages, all from Jackie.

MARCO, STAR, HELP!!
AT JANNA’S
ZOMBIES!!?? BIG SNAKE!
NOT A DUCKING JOKE!!

Shit! Jackie was in danger! Janna too. Never mind half the stuff in those messages did not add up, they would figure it out when they got there. Star summoned herself an outfit, no time to dress the old fashioned way, or otherwise get ready. Just as she did, she saw Marco come back into her room, practically bashing the door in, pulling another red hoodie over himself and holding the dimensional scissors on his right hand.

“Star, sorry for yelling…”

“Marco! No-time-for-unnecessary-apologies. Open that portal!”

----

The tear in the fabric of space happened to open up to Janna’s front yard. The place was unrecognizable. The grass was burned down to a black amorphous waste all around them and a fiery chasm had opened in the ground in front of the door. Beside the crack on the earth lay a large broken wooden box. Star recognized it immediately as Tom’s underworld elevator. She saw the demon who usually lifted it up, Tom’s pet gargoyle, fighting for its life a few meters away.

Around the fiend were six or seven rotting corpses, risen from the ground and walking, each body surrounded by a shadowy purple halo. The shambling bodies were covered in ornate jewelry and decayed rags of what millennia ago might have been fine clothing. One of the undead creatures was biting into the demon’s shoulder.

“Ky-yaaa!” Marco shouted, and with a kick sent the offending zombie’s head flying into the air, separating it cleanly from its torso.

“Mega Narwhal Blast!” Star followed soon after, throwing four others back, slamming them into the ground so strongly their limbs fell apart from their decaying bodies.

“Point Marco, and, ahem, four points Princess Star,” the gargoyle announced surprised. “Um, also, t… thank you…”

Normally she would have made a comment to Marco about the score but, until they found their friends, it was no time for jokes. “You! What is going on, and how is it Tom’s fault?” she asked the demon.

A pillar of flame spiraled out of the fissure in the ground and the aforementioned prince of the underworld came flying with it, propelling himself up by shooting flames from both his hands, eyes glowing bright red. He landed in front of his slave and blasted the remaining two corpses attacking it, one with each of his outstretched hands. After he finished, he turned off the flames. Right after that, his eyes went back to normal. “Hey! Why would this be my fault?!”
“Zombies, demons, chasms to hell,” Marco enumerated with a sarcastic tint to his voice. “It could be anyone, really!”

“Point, Mar…” the gargoyle began, only to be cut off by a glare from his master.

“Now, where is my girlfriend, Tom?” Marco continued, not paying much attention to the interruption.

“Uh,” Tom looked at the boy, then at Star. He huffed annoyed. “Right there, I guess?”

“My other girlfriend, Tom!” Marco shouted. “I mean Jackie!”

Wait, had Marco just called her his girlfriend? Had Tom? Star dismissed the wonderful, scary, and confusing emotions the word was bringing up from inside her. She tried to focus on the situation at hand. Reminding herself that Jackie and Janna were in danger did the trick.

“Tom, explain now what the literal hell is going on here, or I am going to blast you so hard you’ll leave a whole new crater on the way down!” She had no patience for Tom, or for how weirdly guilty seeing him now was making her feel, much less when her friends were in danger!

“Fine… **Starship**,” he almost spat the pet name. It suddenly sounded to her almost like he meant it as an insult. “Your friend… I mean Janna, not the other one… took something from me, and apparently she made a mess with it. She, or someone else, called the elevator up, but I am afraid whatever they did was already too far along. In fact, if we don’t hurry, this royal morons are going to be the least of our problems... Also, ‘my other girlfriend’, what the hell Marco? You fucking pig!”

“Point, master T…” began the demonic servant.

“Shut up!” shouted back Tom and Star at the same time.

“You, enough of that. Take the lift, go back down. Don’t dare tell…” Tom stopped, considered his orders for a second, then added. “If I am not down there in an hour, tell my mother.”

The lesser demon bowed to his prince and proceeded to comply. Star’s anger at Tom was cut short by more pressing priorities. If he was considering telling his family about this, even with a delay to cover things up, well, then he thought they were all in danger. Which meant, that Jackie and Janna were probably **really** in danger.

Star moved quickly. Before the gargoyle fiend had even finished grabbing his broken elevator box, she was blasting down Janna’s door and jumping over the precipice. They had to be in there somewhere. The hordes of zombies that came pouring out of the living-room told the princess she was likely right. “Flesh Eating Moths Hurricane!”

Between her wand and Tom’s pyromancy, they made quick work clearing the place. Hopefully they weren’t too late.

“Jackie!” Marco shouted. A distant muffled cry came from the second floor, and the boy rushed up the stairs, kicking and punching shambling cadavers along the way. Star rushed behind him, blasting the remaining zombies with rainbow punches and terrifyingly fierce woodland creatures. Tom flew up behind her, surprisingly also in a hurry.

“So, what exactly are we looking for?” Star asked.

“Well, if we are early enough, it should be a black funerary urn. Give it to me and I can stop this in
“just a sec,” Tom observed, calmly.

“And if we are not early enough?” Star retorted.

“Then, let me guess: we are going to see a huge ghostly snake?” Marco asked, from farther ahead.

“Well, yes, something like that...” Tom confirmed. “How do you know?... Wait, nah, don’t answer that, I can guess too...” he added, with a resigned expression.

The two of them joined Marco inside Janna’s room. The second thing they noticed was that the roof was missing now. The third thing they noticed were the candles and the blurred circle and pentagram drawn on the floor, broken apart by cracks on the wood beneath them.

The very first they noticed, was, of course, the snake. The shadowy semi-translucent shape of a gigantic cobra, coiled around the bodies of Jackie and Janna, half as thick as they were tall and long enough to probably reach the houses on the other side of the street if fully stretched. Blood red eyes glowed sinisterly against the night sky as it turned to regard the three new arrivals. It opened its mouth to show two huge ivory-white fangs.

“Marco!” Jackie shouted.

“Star!” Janna followed.

At least they seemed relatively unharmed.


“Oh, great,” Tom muttered, more annoyed than afraid. After throwing an exasperated look Janna’s way, he began speaking back at the cobra in a commanding tone. “Midra’Apep, I, Tom Lucitor, command you to withdraw. I invoke my right of reign and domain...”

“YOU HAVE NO DOMAIN IN THIS DIMENSION, PRINCE TOM, AND THUS NO RIGHT TO COMMAND ME!” It spoke back. “I HAVE CLAIMED DOMAIN, I COMMAND YOU TO WITHDRAW!”

“I am afraid that doesn’t work for me, either,” Tom responded, taking a single step forward. “I reject your domain, by the way, it was improperly claimed. Which means,” his eyes glowed burning red and his voice became deeper and echoing, “that we are doing this the hard way!”

“Oh, I can’t believe I am agreeing with Tom,” Star’s face took a scarily fierce look, “But, the hard way sounds great right about now! First... let go of my boyfriend’s girlfriend! Warnicorn Stampede!!”

A herd of terrifying one-horned horses came charging out of thin air. The shadowy serpent’s tail shook violently and swiped horizontally like a titanic whip, meeting the entire stampede head on, throwing warnicorns flying into the air. Tom and Marco took the opportunity to jump ahead, avoiding the viper’s tail. When they reached the coil that held the two girls, Tom pressed his claws against the serpent’s translucent mass and blasted it with a fiery shock-wave. It twitched involuntarily, long enough for Marco to pull Jackie free and jump away. Without the extra body between the coils, Janna simply fell, right into Tom’s arms.
“Woah, my hero,” Jackie said in a half-joking tone, sounding surprisingly calm under the circumstances. Star saw her smile widely at Marco as he carried her away from the monstrosity.

“Hey, Tom, funny story…” Janna spoke to the demon prince as if they knew each other. He groaned in response.

Star realized this was her chance to get a clear shot. The warnicorns had barely done any damage, and she figured a laser cannon might not help too much this time either, but she had recently learned something that seemed to work pretty well against demons. She focused her anger into the wand, letting it produce a blast of emerald and shadow, a wordless spell of dark magic.

The ray came out thin and feeble, it hit Midra’Apep without effect, bouncing off of its shadowy scales. The demi-god seemed slightly more solid, more corporeal, now. It laughed thunderously at Star.

Tom groaned and glared at Marco. “Let me guess, you two just slept together and now she is not angry or frustrated anymore?”

Jackie and Janna looked at both her and the human boy. Jackie seemed a bit embarrassed but smiled faintly. Janna had an almost deranged expression of glee, and gave them thumbs up when Tom was looking elsewhere.

“Fortunately,” Tom continued. “I am having absolutely no problem being angry right now!”

He was glaring at Janna, still in his arms, as he spoke. She barely had time to get back on her feet as he let go of her and began muttering something in a strange guttural language. Chains of flame and lightning sprung up from his claws, wrapping the giant snake’s body. He began to float up, into the night, dragging the monstrous demi-god with him, breaking down one of the room’s walls as he pulled it out into the yard, and then down towards the chasm in the ground. In the last minute, however, Midra’Apep began floating up, of its own power, opposing Tom’s pull.

The two seemed evenly matched in their tug of war. Star tried to help her ex-boyfriend, without much success. Her narwhal blasts seemed to bounce against the snake abomination, and her dark magic blasts kept coming out too puny to make the slightest difference.

“Marco…” Tom spoke, voice strained by the effort of holding down the chains on the monster “…kiss Jackie! Don’t ask why, just do it!”

“Eh…” Marco answered surprised.

Jackie, however, still in his arms, quickly took his cheek in her hand and pulled him down for a kiss. Star looked at that and felt a pang in her stomach. Ok, she got what Tom was trying to do. That blast she had used on him the other day had needed a lot of anger as fuel, after all. And this was literally recreating the conditions of the one she blew a billboard with.

But seriously, couldn’t he have found a more discreet way? Given their conversation earlier in the day, Star didn’t really want Jackie figuring out that it still bothered her when the human girl and Marco kissed. It really wasn’t fair that it did, especially given that Jackie was willing to go out of her way to share Marco with her. Summoning all of her annoyance at both Tom and herself, as well as her jealousy, she tried blasting the serpent again. This time she managed a solid bolt of dark magic, but still nothing like what she had done to Tom two nights ago. The shadow snake flinched in pain, but held its ground. Or its air, as the case may be.

“FOOLS! EVERY SECOND I SPEND IN THIS WORLD, I GROW STRONGER!” The demi-god
shouted. It proceeded to affirm its boast by flying up a bit higher, dragging Tom up into the air this time around.

The demon prince looked at Star, and she could see he was unsure about something. He closed his eyes briefly and, when he opened them again, his regretful sad look was replaced by a bright red iris-less glare of fury and determination.

“Dammit, Star!” Tom shouted. “So now it turns out you don’t even mind Marco wrapping tongues with his side girl? Or, really, his main girl?! Since you are the side-dish, from what I have heard so far. Which, by the way, seriously, Star? That’s kinda pathetic…” He pulled himself back down until his feet made contact with the ground again, muscles tense and arms trembling with the effort, ruby eyes glowing brighter than any other light around them. “Speaking of pathetic, you do realize you and all your friends are now going to be in deep shit for basically all eternity, just because Marco gave you a happy, right? Hell, wish you were back to being a mopey snappy bitch and seeking your comfort in the streets like a common fucking wh…”

“Shut up!” Star shouted at him. She felt a cold sensation spread through her body. Her cheekmarks shone emerald, her wand as well. “Tom, I understand what you are trying to do and, to be absolutely fucking fair, it is working. But damn it if you are not truly the biggest asshole in all of hell!!”

A thick twisting blast of green and black energy emerged forth from the front of her wand, carrying all of her frustration and hate for Tom. Star called upon her memories of that awful night two days ago and her annoyance at his current comments, as well as the fact that she now would have to explain what the demon had just said to Marco and Jackie (and, well, to Janna too, probably)! The powerful beam hit Midra’Apep straight in its open mouth, blasting the serpentine leviathan down into the depths of hell, where Tom reeled it in. The demon prince made a gesture with his hand, and the crack sealed itself after him.

“Wait, what the down there was he on about?” Marco asked, looking at Star confused. She felt a weight inside her stomach. “And why did he want Jackie and I to kiss? ... Not that I am complaining,” he clarified, looking down at the skateboarder girl, who smiled back at him.

“I... he... emh...” Star did so not want to talk about any of that right now, or, well, ever. “Hold that thought, Marco. Janna? Jackie? First, are you two alright? Second, what was going on here before we arrived?!”

“I am fine. As for the second question... Star, it is a bit of a long story... maybe we should get back downstairs first, make sure Jackie is alright too... get you all some tea?” Janna looked around. “Oh, and I really need to figure out how to explain to my parents what happened to the house when they get back... on the one hand, they will never believe the truth... on the other, not sure how they will even explain me doing any of this…”

While Janna was pondering the pro’s and con’s of supernatural home devastation, Jackie finally spoke. “I am fine too, a bit shaken, perhaps,” she admitted, not sounding shaken in the least, for the standards of what she had just experienced. “But I have a question. Well, like a million questions, really. But, one in particular: how come you all seem to be on first name basis with a purple horned demon from hell?!”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Star explained.

“We went out last night,” Janna added, getting an incredulous look from both Jackie and Star.

“Wait, so all of you have dated not only a demon, but that particular demon?” Jackie pressed on.
“Demon prince,” Janna corrected her, proudly.

“Not all of us!” Marco protested, just as quickly.

“Well,” Jackie pondered it for a second. “That would be kinda hot, actually.”

“Yeah...” Star agreed, absentmindedly.

“I said it first,” Janna pointed out.

----

“Here,” Janna handed Star a cup of tea, before turning toward the other sofa to offer the remaining two to Marco and Jackie, who were sitting together. She ventured a sideways glance at Star. If the princess was bothered by that display, it did not show. “Well, glad at least the kitchen is still mostly there. No gas leaks either, I think.” Tom probably would have set those off if that were the case, she reasoned.

“So, ok, Janna, I get the part where you went out with Tom... sort of... and I am going to assume I can’t talk you out of that one, but I am going to need you to explain the snake thing!” Star began the interrogation. Janna had sort of expected it to be Marco, but the boy seemed too busy looking at his other girlfriend and trying to reassure her. Jackie did not look like she needed reassurance, but she was also not complaining, the troublemaker girl noted.

“Well, Star, so Tom was telling me yesterday about this magical urn that brought dead kings back to life,” she said truthfully. “It sounded pretty interesting, so, after the date, I decided to borrow it...”

“Steal it,” Marco corrected, rolling his eyes.

“Whatsoever you want to call it, Safe Kid,” Janna grumbled. “Anyways, it sounded fun. He said nothing about giant snakes or anything like that. So, well, I looked the thing up online and, again nothing about snakes, or any real specifics, but there are some general rituals you can do to unlock an unknown magical object. It kind of needed two people, so I called Jackie over too.”

“Pro-tip, dudes: unlocking rituals are long, choral, majorly weird, and vaguely homo-erotic,” Jackie commented, causing both Janna and Marco to blush. Star threw the skateboarder girl a strange, somewhat worried, look. Jackie shook her head.

“Honestly, I would have tried getting Star for it,” Janna spoke. Jackie raised an eyebrow. Star shuffled uneasily. “Not like that! I just mean it would have been safer with her around. But honestly I was expecting it to not work at all, like most of my stuff, or at most to get us a ghost inside the summoning circle. We had Tom’s bell on stand-by and everything, just in case. I was not counting on dark, long, and megalomaniacal showing up!”

“Janna, honestly, even I know to not go around poking at Tom’s random hell crap,” Star admonished her. “But whatever, next time let me and Marco know, ok? First, it looks like you two were in over your heads with this. Second, some of it was honestly kind of exciting! At least once we knew you two were safe...” The princess smiled at her and punched up in the air with her wand.

Janna was glad Star was in a good mood, after all. She had been worried her friend would take a much dimmer view of her activities, especially after they had called her and Marco in the middle of the night, and after all the stuff Tom had ranted about just a few moments ago. But Star’s happy go lucky demeanor seemed to be back as the default, after months of relative absence. Janna was about to ask herself what had gotten into the princess, but then quickly glanced at Marco,
chuckling at her own involuntary and unspoken joke.

“Actually, Jackie, just, could you never scare me like that again, please?” Marco spoke out of the blue, suddenly sounding very serious. He was staring at Jackie in the eyes and holding her tightly. Star glanced discreetly away, but not discretely enough for Janna not to notice.

“Marco,” Jackie began, looking back at him, thoughtfully and sadly. “Well, I kinda didn’t know what Janna had in mind at first. I suppose I could have refused to go along with it once she mentioned magic rituals, but it didn’t seem that bad at the time. I will probably be a bit more careful with this sort of stuff in the future, but well... no. I mean, my answer is that I cannot promise never to scare you again. What can I say, sometimes I want a little danger in my life! Aww, don’t make that face, Marco. You do this kind of thing all the time, with Star. Hell, based on what you have told me, you spent sixteen years in another dimension, risking your life every single day, and I never even knew! Could you promise me then that you will never again put yourself at risk?”

They all stood there, speechless. Even Janna or Star had nothing to add. The witch wannabe had been about to reassure Marco that she would not involve his girlfriend on something like this again, but now saying that seemed unfair to Jackie.

Eventually, Marco sighed in defeat. “Ok, Jackie, that’s all true. I can’t promise that either. How about this: can you promise to at least try to let me know when you are going to do something this dangerous again? That way we can at least be there for each other.”

“Sure... if you are willing to promise the same?” Jackie countered, with an excited twinkle in her eye.

Marco looked at Star, as if asking for confirmation.

“Oh... eh... Of course!” the princess eventually beamed back at the both of them, still seeming a bit unsure but trying to appear decided. “I think I kinda already promised Jackie she was invited to go on adventures with us, after all...”

Janna could tell Star’s heart was not in those words. The problem was, if she could tell, so could the other two. Marco knew Star better than anyone, and Jackie was actually fairly perceptive as a rule. A long uncomfortable silence descended over the four of them. She was saved from having to do anything about that, however, by a ‘whossh’ sound erupting outside, followed by the ringing of her doorbell.

Janna stood up and, carefully, peeked through the peephole. On the other side, the purple demon looked impatient, his hair messed up and shirt half shredded, presumably from the fight with the snake demi-god.

“Hey, Tom, glad to see you back,” the dark haired girl spoke quickly, in an ambiguously apologetic tone. “Please, come in! Can I offer you some tea?”

“No,” he replied simply. “I just wanted to make sure you all,” he looked at Janna, then at Star, “were doing ok.”

“Pfft,” Star huffed. Her good mood suddenly again dissipated. “We are fine, Tom. By the way, thanks for the peptalk earlier, real classy stuff!”

The demon’s initially neutral expression turned into an angry glare in response. “Well, thanks for not leaving me to finish the fight on my own... oh, wait, that’s exactly what you all did!” Tom
retorted, eyes glowing and flames spewing out of him. Jackie looked around nervously, Marco just rolled his eyes and mouthed silently: ‘drama queen’.

“Figured you got things under control. I threw him square inside your dominion or whatever the word is,” Star served back.

“Domain! And I did have it under control,” Tom replied, with contained annoyance.

“Then? What was the problem?!” Star shouted, with open irritation.

“They really did use to date, didn’t they?” Jackie joked at Marco, finally getting a bit more at ease with the whole demon prince situation.

“Well, yeah,” Star admitted, glancing back at them. Then, nervously, she added, “A long time ago, though!”

“Oh, sure,” Tom smirked viciously, stepping towards the princess. He spoke in a mocking, sarcastic tone. “Long long ago. You know... water under the bridge?”

Star tensed in response to those words, her hand gripping her wand hard enough that her knuckles were starting to turn white. Her back was to Marco and Jackie, but Janna could see half of the horrified expression she wore. The troublemaker girl was not sure exactly how the dots connected, but she knew that was her cue to intervene, before Star blasted her ex or he let out any information the other teens would regret hearing.

“Tom,” she began, looking at the floor. “I... I am sorry about the urn, I didn’t know what would happen.” That was true, as far as it went. “Thanks so much for saving me...” Ok, she was maybe overdoing it just a tiny bit.

She moved towards him, placing herself between the demon and Star, touching a hand up to his left cheek and winking at him. “It is just, after last night, I needed a way to make sure I would see you again. I thought taking the urn with me would ensure you showed up. I wasn’t planning on using it at first. I am so glad you did come back,” she ranted, perhaps a bit melodramatically. That said, that was two truths and one lie, so she was at least statistically honest.

“Oh, really?” he asked. Tom’s smile became broader and only slightly less sinister. Clearly he was catching on but, Janna observed, he also seemed genuinely pleased. “Didn’t figure I made that much of an impression.” He was smirking, at herself and at a probably disconcerted Star behind her. Good. “Next time just ask for a second date. I’d rather you not release imprisoned demi-gods every time... seriously, Janna, most people would have earned an eternity of torment for just the one!”

Janna grinned mischievously at him. “Well, I am already going to be grounded for fifty years at least for what happened to the house. But how about you ‘torment’ me for the night?” she purred. “After all, I just learned today you are pretty handy with chains!”

Unable to resist it, Janna sneaked a peek back at the other three. Star and Marco were both making a face, though Star’s disgust seemed a bit exaggerated, and perhaps mixed with something else, if you asked the dark haired girl. Jackie just played it cool and sipped her tea.

“Oh, is that truly what you want?” Tom teased, with a pleased smile. “Fine. I have my own reasons to not want you grounded, and I am pretty sure my servants and I can get most of this mess sorted out before your parents show up. In exchange, I shall personally punish you for your thievery...” he added gleefully, and a shiver ran between Janna’s legs.
Jackie calmly put her cup on the table. “Well, I think that’s the cue for the three of us to leave. Marco? Star?”

---

Well, that had been a truly strange day, thought Star to herself. No, not the fifty feet snake or the undead hordes. That was well within the range of a normal Sunday for her. But, Janna dating Tom? And, had he been, sort of, worse than his usual self? Sure, he had needed her pissed off for the fight, maybe. But he didn’t even think of apologizing after, he just kept sniping at her! And had Janna taken his side? Also, what was that about chains? Were Janna and Tom now going to... she didn’t want to even think of that, she told herself, unconvincingly.

“Well, Jackie, I guess we should walk you home now,” Marco interrupted the princess thoughts. “Actually, I can walk you home. Star, thanks so much, for everything. I understand if you’d rather go back to sleep now, sorry for dragging you into this.” He offered her the scissors.

Oh, right, that was the other weird thing that had happened today. She and Marco had become lovers, at the very least. Star blushed.

“Awww, Marco, no need to apologize. I drag you into stuff like this all the time!” she pointed out. Then a thought crossed her mind. There was one other very weird thing about this day that Star felt she needed to address, sooner rather than later. She took a deep breath. “Actually, you should go back to sleep! I will take Jackie back to her place. I can always sleep in class!” She smiled.

“Star, that’s not...” Marco began admonishing.

“Yeah, yeah, you know it will happen either way,” she stopped him. “Besides, I kinda want to talk to Jackie. You know, girl stuff?”

Jackie raised an eyebrow at her and smirked. Marco shuffled nervously. “Ah, Star... ok, sure. Jackie?”

“Sounds good to me!” the skateboarder girl replied. She leaned towards Marco and kissed him smack on the lips. Well, that made this even harder, but also, even more necessary, if you asked Star. The other blonde just seemed to look at Star expectantly. “Well, aren’t you going to kiss him goodnight too?” she asked.

“I... ah... eh...” Star stammered.

Marco was red like a beet, but seeing Star’s conflict, he walked towards her. “Star, we can always kiss later, in private, if this is being too much on the spot. For now... hugs?”

“Hugs!” Star laughed and hugged Marco. Then, feeling his now familiar arms around her, she changed her mind. What the hell! She tilted her head upwards and kissed him softly.

“Whoa, go Diaz!” Jackie chuckled.

Star felt super embarrassed, but she didn’t feel Jackie had meant anything bad by her comment. Eventually, Marco separated from her too and, after asking if they were sure and shooting them both an apprehensive look, opened a portal back to his bedroom and disappeared through it.

“So, what’s up, Star?” Jackie asked immediately. “Going to trade racy stories about our boy Marco?”

“Please, don’t even try to tell me you don’t have any this time!” the other girl continued nonchalantly, amused even. “I knew you two were back from doing it the moment he barged in through the door, his hair always gets messy in a weird way after it. Sorry if we interrupted, by the way! But, well, it was kinda life or death...”

“No! Jackie, stop!” Star shouted frustrated. The human blinked at her and looked back, hurt. “I mean, yeah... we kinda... well... we did...” Oh God! Why was she telling Jackie that?! Well, I mean, it was obvious they had, but still, to come out and say it that way, to her, was weird. “I just, I just wanted to talk about other stuff...”

“Oh,” Jackie stopped on her tracks, stood there in silence for a moment and turned back to face Star. “Sorry. What do you want to talk about?”

“I... well... why are you so alright with this? With me and Marco, I mean,” Star asked. It took effort to get each word out.

“Are you not alright with it, Star? No, wait, you asked me a question, I should answer first,” Jackie took her hand to her chin, pondering. “I am not always alright with it. Sometimes I am scared that Marco will decide that he likes you much more than he likes me, or that you two will want to be a normal couple after all and shut me out of it. But, on the other hand, I see that you make him happy, and that he makes you happy, and I wouldn’t feel right stopping you two from making each other happy.”

“And it doesn’t bother you, when... if I make him happy, at all?” Star pressed.

“No,” Jackie replied, almost too simply. “Not really. It never has, not with Marco, not with the boys I have been interested in before. It is not for lack of caring about him, I mean, I think I am in love with him, at least as much as you are. It is actually the other way around: because I care about him, when you make him happy, it mostly just makes me happy too. I guess I am just wired that way? I dunno, I already told you, I think I am weird...”

“Jackie, you are weird-awesome!” Star said, a bit too forcefully. “The thing is, what happens if I am not? If I can’t be awesome about it like you are? If sometimes I worry or fret when Marco is happy with you? If I get jealous or feel selfish? If sometimes I feel like I am in a competition with you, that for me to win you would have to lose? If... I guess, if I am a horrible person?”

“Star, I think that’s all just you being normal...” Star blinked. There was a first for everything, and certainly that was it for her name and that particular adjective. “But, well, I doubt very much you are a horrible person, or even that selfish, really. I mean, if you were, why are you telling me this? If you wanted to, I dunno, steal Marco from me, then the last thing you should probably be doing is telling me, right?”

“No, no, no, I don’t want to do that!” Star answered, horrified. Then she remembered her glee at the advantage her magic connection with Marco could give her, and felt even more awful. “Ok, sometimes, a small part of me wants that. But I could never do that to Marco, or to you. I’d rather go back to how things were before than hurt you two, or abuse your trust... that’s why I wanted to tell you how I feel, I guess to... warn you? I dunno... not that I want to change things now, but...” She wasn’t sure what she expected the human girl to do with the information, actually.

“Star... would it help if I told you how I felt this afternoon? When I was with Janna, knowing you and Marco were probably doing it? I am not asking you to feel the way I feel about this sort of thing, just to understand, and maybe, if you can come at it from my point of view, it will help you feel less bad when the situation is reversed,” Jackie spoke, and Star nodded. “Basically, I got reminded of the times I have seen you and Marco interact, how he looks at you, the stories he has
told me about you, how he can’t really stop talking about you. I imagined him having a good time, being happy with you, and, usually, when I know he is being happy, I feel happy too. Let me put it this way, if he called you and told you he was having really good ice-cream, and you knew you couldn’t be there to have ice-cream with him or you didn’t like ice-cream, would you be annoyed that he was enjoying ice-cream without you or just glad he was having a good day?”

“Who doesn’t like ice-cream?! Also, Jackie, I don’t think that’s quite the same...” But Star wasn’t sure she could quite pinpoint why exactly it wasn’t.

“Maybe not. I guess I don’t know how to explain it, then. I just don’t necessarily connect him being happy with you or liking you with him not liking me... except...” Jackie went a bit somber for a moment. “I guess there was a time it bothered me. Friday, actually, when he said your name when we were having sex. Today doesn’t bother me, or yesterday. If he is alone with you, it doesn’t bother me, but it did bother me when he was with me... and maybe thinking of you...”

“He said my name?” Star tried processing the information. That had been the night with Tom, hadn’t it? When she had seen Marco and Jackie, and she had called Marco’s name. Had that really happened? Had she been seeing them through her bond with Marco? Had he seen her back? Was that why he had said her name and nothing else? Had he seen her... with Tom?

“He didn’t tell you?” Jackie asked, interrupting Star’s train of thought. “Oh, sorry, I shouldn’t have brought that up with you before he did, Star, never mind that.”

“Jackie,” Star finally was putting the pieces together. “I, I don’t think that was because he was thinking about me...” she began, but the words died in her mouth as the next realization hit her. “Wait! Was that why you two fought and why you told him to ask me out?!”

Jackie stared back in silence, then nodded. “It was when I knew for a fact that he liked you too, Star.”

But, but Jackie has said that had been something that bothered her. So why ask Marco to get closer to her? It didn’t make any sense! But for all the sense it didn’t make, it had made Star happy last night and earlier that day, and it had made Marco happy, and it seemed to make Jackie mostly happy. So, perhaps there was something to the other girl’s way of thinking that Star was just not seeing.

Either way, neither of them seemed to be able to find their words for the rest of the walk back to Jackie’s place.

----

“So, Janna, how much of that was putting an act for Star, how much putting an act for me, and how much was real?” Tom asked, darkly. His demeanor seeming a lot less friendly with her after the others departed. “You know I can coax the truth from you eventually, so this would be the time to come clean...”

“Mmmm,” she made a show of thinking it out. She saw no point in making things too easy for the demon prince. “What if I prefer it for you to coax the truth from me, after all?”

“Fine,” Tom sighed. His lip curved to the left and he opened his mouth slightly to show off a single sharp fang in an unnerving smirk. “Let’s do this the hard way, then, seems like that is the order of the day. After all, you asked to be punished, didn’t you?”

She did, of course. But Janna hoped Tom had gotten that she meant fun sexy punishment and not,
well, literal torture. Right now, given the way he looked at her, hollow eyes smoldering dark red, it was not clear that he understood her intent, or cared. He lifted a hand and snapped his fingers. Two pillars of flame emerged to the thieving girl’s sides, gracing her arms. The fire hurt and burned, but much less than she would have expected it to, more like an excessively hot shower than flesh-charing blazes. When the flames stopped, there were two heavy chains going from the floor of Janna’s living room to a pair of shackles on her wrists. She looked down to see an identical pair holding her legs.

“I want you to understand, Janna, that stealing that urn was incredibly stupid, and that attempting to use it without knowing anything about it was beyond idiotic...” he said, advancing towards her.

He lowered his hands and the chains slid downwards through the floor and backwards along the surface, forcing Janna on her knees and bending her arms towards her back in an uncomfortable position. He extended his left index then and pushed the tip of his claw into Janna’s forehead, until it drew a single drop of blood. Tom licked his finger, murmuring something in a language she couldn’t understand.

“Do you understand the kind of trouble you could have been in if Star and I had gotten here even minutes later?”

“Yes.”

“Did you understand it before you took the urn?”

“No.”

Tom seemed to hesitate at her response, clearly it was not what he expected to hear. “Would you have taken it anyways, had you known?”

“No.”

“That’s a LIE!” he growled. Eyes glowing fiercely, fire burning around him. Janna felt the shackles tighten and pull even further back, stretching her arms in a very painful manner. She felt afraid. For the first time since they had done it, she felt genuinely scared of the demon prince.

“Fine,” she spat. “I would have taken it anyways, but I would have probably not unlocked it if I knew what was inside!”

He seemed surprised again. But he raised a hand and the chains gave out just a little bit, easing her pain back into a more bearable level of discomfort. “Why would you have still taken it then?!”

“I told you,” Janna said, looking to the side, as annoyed at him as she was afraid. “Because I wanted to make sure I’d see you again. Didn’t think the bell would necessarily be enough...”

She felt a powerful grip around her chin, as Tom forcefully turned her face back to look into his hollow burning eyes. But when she looked back, she saw the eyes were back to normal and Tom had a confused but calm expression. “That... that wasn’t a lie...”

He leaned forward, pressed his lips against her, and kissed her. Despite the chains and the awkward position, Janna found herself reciprocating the kiss. Fiery passion flowed between the two of them as they welcomed and fought each other in the space between their mouths. Eventually, Tom pulled himself back up, smiling downwards at her.

“I believe, you still deserve to be... punished, some more,” he winked at her. “But if you want it to stop, feel free to say so.”
She most certainly did not, especially now that she knew for sure she was in no real danger. Or, at least, she had reason to hope that was the case. “Oh, believe me, there is still a lot of punishment you have left to do here, Tommy-boy! Besides, aren’t you like, reading my mind now or something?” The way he seemed to know which of her words were true and which weren’t was suspicious, to put it mildly.

“No exactly. I can mostly just tell when you are lying for now.” he explained. Well, that was interesting, Janna thought to herself.

“Fine. I hate you!”

“Lie!” Tom shouted and slapped Janna’s cheek with the back of his right hand. Hard. Probably not as hard as he could, demon and all, but hard enough to send a confusingly exciting jolt of pain through her face.

“That did not turn me on!” she protested, on purpose, trying to keep a straight face.

“That... is a lie,” Tom replied, grinning. “You are a freak.”

“Well,” she paused, “that is not a lie...”

Tom hit her again, on the other side, and at the same time she felt the chains tense behind her. The pain shot through her face and her arms at the same time. Janna felt herself getting wet. She knew Tom was truly phenomenally dangerous, that he could hurt her for real if he wanted, that he had the temper and he had cause. For some reason, that made Janna giddy inside. But also, the hottest part, truly, was the he was controlling himself, hurting her only as much as she could handle. Perhaps, less than what she could really handle.

Tom grabbed at the collar of her dark green t-shirt. He pulled down, using his claws to rip it open, letting her chest free without undoing the chains. He stared at her exposed breasts for a while, as if deciding what to do with them. Then he lowered both hands and began softly twisting her nipples. Janna felt the urge to squirm, but she could barely turn around given the way the chains pulled her back, pushing her exposed chest forward. Tom twisted and pulled for what felt like hours. Eventually she could not take it anymore.

“Tom, I want your cock!” she shouted. It was like a line out of a porno, but surely that would make him switch tracks.

“That... wasn’t a lie.”

The demon raised an eyebrow and removed his pants. He walked over to Janna, until his purple member was right in front of her face, firm and pointing towards her. She had to stretch her neck to even begin to wrap her lips around the tip. But, as soon as she did, Tom trusted forward violently, pushing against her throat. She tried taking his dick deep, but he thrashed around, making her gag, seemingly more interested in keeping punishing her than on making her job easier. She felt herself reduced to sloppily fighting the intrusions with her tongue as Tom carelessly fucked her face.

Suddenly, she felt claws pinching both nipples. Janna yelled in pain and surprise, only to find that the demon took the opportunity to ram his cock deep down her throat. She felt nauseous, and found it hard to breathe. But as suddenly as it had entered her, Tom pulled back, taking his prick out of her mouth entirely. That’s when Janna noticed the chains were gone. How long ago had Tom made them vanish?

“Crawl on your knees!” Tom commanded her, and she was only too eager to obey.
Janna felt a claw rip her underwear off. Then a pair of probing fingers pushing inside her wet folds. Moments after, she felt Tom’s hands on her shoulders and his hard erection poking at her entrance. She thrust herself back at him before Tom had a chance to surprise her again. They moved each of their own volition, slamming violently against each other, mating like animals in her family living room’s floor.

She felt her own climax building up, and moaned loudly. She felt Tom’s hand forcefully slap her ass, causing her to contract around his cock, increasing the pressure and friction. Then a second slap came, and then a third, and soon it became part of their discordant rhythm together.

“I hate you!”

“That was a lie.”

“I think you are a jerk!”

“... Lie.”

“I only want power and magic from you!”

“... Lie.”

“I want you, Tom!”

“...”

He grunted. She moaned. They came together and fell to the floor, exhausted. Janna felt bruised, and sore all over, but strangely satisfied.

They almost fell asleep like that, until she realized there was still an issue they needed to address. Two issues, really, but first things first. “So, Tom... about getting the house back in one piece...”

He groaned, tiredly. “Oh, right, sure.” He began getting dressed, and she followed suit. “Janna, I can have demons guide every pebble of rubble, every splinter of wood, back to where it belongs. But I am going to need you to give me permission to see your surface thoughts, and I am going to need you to remember how everything looked before, room by room and wall by wall, until we have this whole thing fixed. I can’t make plants grow, but you can always blame the garden on a car driving over it or something...”

“Do you need my permission to read my thoughts?”

“Usually, yes.”

“And it will only be what I am thinking about, right this instant?”

“Yup, nothing but surface thoughts.”

She thought it for a while. Well, it couldn’t be any worse that what she had already revealed, could it? She shrugged her shoulders. “Sure. Go ahead!”

“Ok, good,” Tom stopped, his eyes going wide. “Janna, you perv!”

“Sorry,” she said with a smile. That was a lie, which he of course knew. But she focused on the house from then on.
This chapter was a bitch to write. Next chapter should end Part I, and also give you all some more fluffy smut from our other main couple(s?) :)

Chapter End Notes
Acts of Compersion

Chapter Summary

In which Star hatches and flawlessly executes a master plan of her own, a date is truly out of this world, and a main couple enjoys a well deserved happy ending, to the satisfaction of all parties!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 09: Acts of Compersion

**Continuity stardate:** This chapter takes place a week after the SvtFoE episode “Just Friends” (S02E20b) and shortly before “Face the Music” (S02E21). The story has diverged from the SvtFoE season 2 mainline.

The week that followed was surprisingly normal, almost eerily so; school, homework, family dinners, the works. To the troublemaker’s girl relief, Janna’s parents had arrived to a house almost in better shape than the one they left. The only exception being the barren and dead garden, which she managed to effectively blame on older drunk teens driving over it. Tom had even helped her fake the tracks.

Janna’s parents were not the attentive type to begin with, which came useful in situations like this. Granted, her usual shenanigans did not tend to involve risking the end of the world as we know it, but this wouldn’t really even be the first time she had to cover up gross property damage to her family home. Not, she would proudly note, the first time she had succeeded.

Her parents obliviousness had a secondary benefit too: it made her exceptionally self-reliant. It had made her clever, and not only, nor even primarily, in the book sort of way. She had been running circles around mum and dad since the fifth grade, and around her classmates even before that. Marco in particular. And, in the last two days, she had proved that she could hold her own against the fiendish cleverness of a prince of hell itself!

Well, more or less. She had, looking at it objectively, outsmarted Tom at a couple plots, then been solidly beaten down in return. Pun very much intended. But, if perhaps she had lost, she had, in her own assessment, also won. Won in every way that mattered.

All in all, her plan had worked almost flawlessly, giant snake or not. Tom had told her to keep the bell, and that he hoped to see her again. Jackie and Marco were still officially a couple at school, with Star seemingly keeping her own relationship with the boy under wraps.

The later was greatly helped by the fact that Marco and his roommate had always been ambiguously close. It had taken months for the students of Echo Creek to come to accept that Star and Marco were not secretly making out after like the first week she moved in to Earth. So, now that they actually were, no one would even think about the possibility. Besides, if anything, the
two of them would have seemed, to a casual observer, less close than the week before.

So, victory sweet victory, dance puppets dance!

And yet, Janna could not help but feel a bit out of her depth.

That Sunday night had been intense, in a way she had not expected it to be. Sure, the unlocking ritual going out of her control and summoning a snake monster was a bit unsettling and all. But really, the scariest part had been what happened after, with Tom.

It was not just the chains and not just the forcefulness, but how it made her feel. Sure, Janna owned her own pair of chains, and Tom had made some comment about it when she had him restore that part of her room. But, she always had thought that, well, if there was going to be any tying up in her sex life, whenever it begun, she would be the one doing the tying. Now, in a weekend, most of her fantasies had gone from hypothetical to very much real, and her role had not been the one she had expected. The strangest thing was that she had enjoyed it; very much so, in fact. That was, she thought, the part that scared her the most.

Yeah, that must be it. It scared her how much she could get lost in the sensations of pain and pleasure, in the excitement of surrendering control, or the fun of their banter and back and forth. What if she lost control completely? What if Tom did? He had not harmed her, not really. The demon could kill her in an instant, and yet he had hurt her just enough to satisfy her own personal cravings, without so much as leaving a mark for the next morning. But was he not still dangerous nonetheless? Was he not unstable? Upon later reflection, Janna was, literally enough, playing with fire.

Star had tried to tell her to stay away from Tom, more than once over the week.

“I mean, Janna, I guess he is not that bad as a friend,” the princess had said, grimacing as she forced herself to be fair. “He hangs out with Marco sometimes and it goes... alright. But, dating Tom? It can get seriously un-fun, believe me, I have been there.”

“So, is dating the Diaz-Thomas hive-mind a much better idea, then?” Janna had sniped back.

That managed to throw the mewman girl off her case. First, because she had to explain to her she didn’t mean a literal hive-mind. Second, because Star had always made a weird face and excused herself whenever Janna asked about her relationship with Marco, or about the skateboarder girl in general. The princess and Marco had arrived together from his home every morning that week, which was not unusual. But, whenever they were in school, the princess mostly left him and Jackie alone together, and hung out with Janna or Starfan. Whenever the former tried probing her about it, Star found a way to avoid the subject altogether. She seemed in a good mood. In fact, Star was visibly happier and bubblier in general these days, compared to any in the weeks right before, and she seemed to be in good terms with both Marco and Jackie. Still, she would not talk much to them or about them, while in school, not even with Janna.

Despite it all, Janna had to admit Star’s advice regarding Tom seemed worth heeding. The magical princess had a pretty high tolerance for danger, and she could take care of herself far better than Janna could. Exciting as Tom was, what if he took things too far? If he got angry? Could she stop him? Get away?

But, in the almost three days straight she had spent with the demon, menacing as he was, he had never truly harmed her. He had never harmed Star either, Janna thought, despite his anger issues, despite the years of knowing each other. From what she knew, Tom had truly tried working on those problems too. In fact, that last night, after they had done it, after the violence and the
punishment, he had been almost sweet. He had helped her repair the house, wall by wall, brick by brick, careful with the access she had granted him to her thoughts. After they were done, he had held her, and he had roamed a clawed hand through her hair, more mellow than she had ever seen him. He told her to call him again soon.

What if this was what scared her, then? She was attracted to Tom, sure, that was old news. But, was she falling for him? She knew he was not falling for her. Tom’s true crush was Star, always would be. Janna would be a fool to forget that.

Too many questions, too many perils. Her plan had worked too well for her own good.

----

Friday arrived and Star was still hesitant about her decision.

Not her decision of dating Marco, of course. She would not miss their new situation for the world! Sure, she had opted for giving him and Jackie as much space as she could at school, but that was because, after all, she and her roommate had the afternoons for themselves.

The weird thing was, even in their time alone, things hadn’t been too different from their dynamic before. Sure, there were more smooches now, on top of the friendly hugs, and they certainly had made use of her glitter bubble spell once or twice over the week. Yet, ninety percent of the time, they were what they had always been up to that point, the world’s bestest besties. They laughed together, watched movies together, went hunting for magical gemstones together, and, ok, occasionally, just occasionally, made out together. A lot.

But there was one thing they hadn’t done yet, a place they hadn’t been to, which Star was saving as a surprise. Well, as half of a surprise. Carefully, she took Marco’s scissors out of her purse and waited, leaning against the porch of the school. She waved at StarFan and Janna as they passed her by, but kept on waiting. She waited until it seemed like every student had already come out through that door. Every student except two. She waited some more.

She did not mind the wait. It was not like her mind was making up ideas about what the other two teens might be getting up to inside the school buildings or anything of the sort, she told herself, unconvincingly.

Eventually, Marco and Jackie emerged through the door, holding hands. The boy’s hair looked only slightly tousled, and it was pretty obvious, to Star at least, that they had been making out back there. An understandable delay, all things considered. She shrugged.

“Whoa, hey Star! Sorry to keep you waiting,” Marco spoke hesitantly, looking down. He seemed about as not used to this whole thing as she was, which, in a way, was a relief. “Next time I can catch you home, I mean, if you prefer... or I can hurry up too... I...”

“I believe,” Jackie said, with a smile and a raised eyebrow. “That this is where I hand him off. As he said, sorry for the delay, Star. But you get it the rest of the day, so I hope you don’t mind too much!” She beamed a knowing grin at Star.

Star grinned back. “Actually, Jackie, are you busy this afternoon?”

“Well, I was planning to go do a few ramps, but nothing set in stone, really,” she replied, a bit surprised. “Want to hang out? All three of us, or...”

“Actually, Jackie, I was thinking the two of you might want to get this afternoon, since it is the weekend and all. And well, I think I know just the place!” Star added, dramatically revealing the
scissors she had hastily hid behind her. Her palms were sweaty on the handles and she had to make a small effort not to show her nerves. Well, fake it ‘til you make it, she thought to herself.

“Star?” Marco asked surprised.

“Just trust me, ok?! You’ll see, no need to take anything, or worry about missing dinner. I’ll explain to your parents that you are out on a date, Marco!” she added, in a quick torrent of words. She had put some thought into her plan. But perhaps, not enough. “Jackie, you might want to text yours now, I guess?”

“Um. Sure, I’ll let mom know,” Jackie shrugged and pulled out her phone.

“But, why, Star?” Marco pushed. “Not that I am complaining, but I thought you said you had plans tonight...”

“I did,” she admitted. “Plans for you two! This is it, or well, these are them!”

“But, I thought... I mean...” He looked at her, then at Jackie. He exhaled loudly. “I am not sure how to put this, Star, but, well, I am not complaining, I just don’t understand...”

“Marco,” Jackie raised a hand, shutting him up. “Let me handle this, alright?”

The human girl grabbed Star and huddled close, as to not be overheard.

“Star, are you sure about this?” she whispered into the princess’ ear. “I thought you weren’t too comfortable with, well... with Marco and I, so, why?”

“Yeah, well, that’s part of the reason,” Star replied, not bothering to whisper back. “I guess I have been thinking about what you said, last time, and want to give that a try. You know, your thing, whatever the opposite of jealousy is...”

She eyed Marco, waiting for his reaction to her tacit admission of having been jealous before. He didn’t look surprised. Mostly, he seemed relieved. ‘Ok, so much for being discreet and inconspicuous, Star,’ she thought to herself. Sometimes it was a pain how well Marco could read her.

“Anyways, the point is: there is this place I had been thinking of visiting with Marco for a while, but this whole week I have been thinking about it, and the more I think, the more it feels right that it is the two of you going there instead! There are plenty of other fun places left to visit in the wide wild multiverse, so you are not entirely off the hook on me taking you out on dates, Marco Diaz,” she jokingly prodded the underside of his chin with a finger. “But, well, I think, today, it should be you two! I really hope you like it and...”

She was interrupted by a hug from Marco, and a deep kiss. As soon as he let go, Jackie quickly jumped at her and hugged her too.

“Thanks, Star! But, if you feel uncomfortable, now or in the future, let me know, alright? You don’t have to prove anything to us, or pretend you are ok unless you truly are,” she spoke. “Plus, well, you know I don’t want to monopolize Marco either!”

Star laughed. Honestly, in the time since their first date, Star was sure she had been spending more time overall with Marco than Jackie had been, specially time alone with Marco. Hell, even before they were dating, Star and Marco spent more time together than he did with Jackie.

“Yeah, yeah, alright,” she pushed the scissors forward and concentrated on their destination. “No
more time to waste. Off you go!"

She pushed Marco first, then Jackie, closing the portal after them. With a sigh, she let herself collapse, sitting on the floor. Once she stopped focusing on smiling, a look of worry and doubt settled on Star’s face.

Was she doing the right thing? Could she handle it?

What if she couldn’t handle it?

----

The oval pink portal opened up on top of a large circular pillow, far too large to fit on any normal-sized living room, let alone sit atop a sofa or chair. A giant’s seat cushion. It stood among an infinite sea of similarly outlandish pillows of all shapes, sizes, colors and, presumably, degrees of softness, judging by their appearance. The pillows extended in every direction over the plane and, peeking below those at the surface level, they also seemed layered on top of even more pillows. Pillows all the way down, into unknowably deep, yet fluffy, strata. Gargantuan ones, as well as mountains of more moderately-sized ones, rose up as mountains here and there in the far distance.

As far as Marco’s eyes could see, Jackie and himself seemed to be alone in the entire cushion ocean. Above them, an endless space was softly illuminated by bright balls of multicolored light. They seemed far too close to the surface, and too well defined, too three-dimensional, to be stars. In between the spheres, ran endlessly long ribbons of translucent fabric, wider than the two of them were tall. Every color seemed to be represented in the canopy of ribbons, giving the landscape a vibrancy of hues that seemed almost excessive, but stopped short of overwhelming the senses, remaining pleasing to the eyes. The air was similarly saturated with sundry pleasant, yet reasonably subtle, aromas, that seemed to come from nowhere in particular.

The particular pillow they landed on was red: the exact red of Marco’s hoodie. It was hard enough to walk on if needed, but soft enough that when they had originally landed on it, sitting, they felt no harshness on impact. The silky ribbon right on top of them was ocean green. Clearly Star had planned this to the last detail, at least in choosing their landing location on this strangely comfortable dimension.

“Whoa,” Jackie muttered, wide eyes looking around in every direction. “This is... incredible.” It was no overstatement.

Marco, more used by now to the amazing vistas of far flung dimensions, was the first to recover his focus long enough to notice the items and the notes in the middle of ‘their’ pillow. He grabbed one of the notes and glanced at its contents, “Hey, this looks like Star’s handwriting!”

“Oh, what does it say?” Jackie finally replied, once she was able to pry her gaze away from the rivers of reflective multicolored silk in the sky. “You know, Marco, when she did that field trip, I thought she was showing us the best dimension. Like, she called it the dimension of Wonders and Amazements. But this, this is something else... are all the dimensions you two travel to this cool?”

“Well...” Marco started. Certainly there had been worse places they had visited. “All are kind of amazing in their own way, really, but not all this comfortable,” he said after some consideration. It was the truth, and if it made him sound cool and knowledgeable to Jackie, all the better.

“So, Marco, the note?” she reminded him after a moment.

“First, take of your clothes.”
“Woah! Ok, Diaz, sure, but, you know, we have the whole afternoon for that...” Jackie replied, with a laugh and a shrug.

“No, no... I mean, that’s, what Star’s note says,” Marco clarified, flustered once more. “I was just reading, I didn’t mean...”

“Oh, well, if Star says so...” the girl shrugged again and began pulling up her t-shirt. Clearly Jackie didn’t exactly dislike the idea, either way. “Is there more to it, though?”

“Second, eat some food, parenthesis: not too much, don’t want to be too full. Smiley face,” he read on. Looking down, he noticed there was a picnic basket. He opened to find two sandwiches inside. For some reason, they seemed somehow unearthly, yet familiar, to him. There was also an assortment of fruits, some he recognized from Earth, a few he did not, as well as a few sodas, juices and two mini champagne bottles. “Seems like she left us provisions...”

“Very thoughtful of her,” Jackie murmured absentmindedly, somewhere behind Marco.

“Third, use the vials. Parenthesis: it is oil, it goes on your skin,” Marco kept reading. He looked down to see a ribbon around two ornamented glass bottles and an opaque black crystal. “Fourth, hold onto the crystal. Do not touch until after the oils. Triple exclamation mark. I will fetch you both tomorrow morning, try to be decent. Winky face. P.S. There is a restroom booth behind the big green triangle cushion... Man, she did plan this one through...” It was not like Star to be this detailed in her ideas. She usually made things up as she went along. Then again, Marco thought, it wasn’t as if she was going to be along for this particular trip. Maybe she felt more compelled not to leave things to chance if it was Jackie and Marco who would be left to their own devices in an unknown dimension, especially after the Hekapoo incident...

“So, it would be a shame if we don’t follow her instructions, right? Given how much effort she clearly put into this,” Jackie remarked, slowly, almost whispering on the boy’s ear. “With that in mind, aren’t you a bit behind on the list, Marco?”

Marco turned around when he felt her hand on his shoulder. His eyes opened wide and his mouth hung low as he took in the view. Jackie had fully disrobed as he read Star’s letter, and now stood at arm length from him, entirely naked. Perky breasts and toned slim body drawing his eyes, soft skin beckoning to be touched, sparkling eyes beaming at him over her smile. Long lean legs ending in a bare smooth triangle. Marco had been seeing a lot of Jackie these last few weeks, yet it still always left him speechless, particularly now that he had been caught by surprise.

“Wow,” he replied, somewhat dumbly.

“So, Marco Diaz, still into your boring old girlfriend?” Jackie joked at him, clearly pleased with his reaction. “Or does that become too ordinary after dating magical princesses?”

It took Marco a few moments to process the words, and to collect his thoughts back from the sight in front of him. “Jackie, I’ve always been into you, I can’t imagine not being into you. You can’t ever be ‘boring’ or ‘old’ anything to me. Honestly, what I still don’t get is what you, well, either of you, see in me.”

“Plenty of things, Diaz,” she retorted, with a smile. “Can’t speak for Star, but I can see that you are brave, and caring, and handsome, and open-minded, and well... clearly well traveled,” she looked around. “But right now, I think I’d like to see a lot more of you. After all, Star’s orders, and it’s only fair.”

She winked at him and Marco went red once more. Then, smiling calmly back, he began removing
his hoodie, as Jackie walked towards the picnic basket and grabbed one of the sandwiches.

“Mmmhh... wow, I fthink, this is ’e besth sandwich I ’ave ever had, like, ev’r!” she spoke, with her mouth still full.

Eventually, Marco sat besides her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. Jackie nested herself comfortably against the boy’s naked torso and ran a hand through his leg. The sandwich was indeed extraordinary, and Marco now had a pretty good idea of the kind of trouble Star had probably gone through to get it. If he had known it was this good last time, when she first told him about these, then perhaps he would have not given her so much grief about risking their lives pulling the stuff out of sleeping monsters. It was hard to believe, but it was absolutely worth it.

“So, Jackie, are you still sure you are ok with it all? Me and Star, I mean?” he ventured. Marco was still incredulous at his luck, and maybe a bit worried that by asking the two of them so often, such luck would come to an end. But it didn’t feel right to not check on how Jackie felt about it.

“Yeah... I mean, clearly you still seem to like me and, well, look around, this place is incredible. So, it is pretty obvious that there are perks of sharing you with Star!” Jackie declared, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “Honestly, I kinda wanted to ask about the two of you. I... I want you to tell me everything.” She bit her lip.

Not without significant awkwardness, Marco managed to relate the events of the past week to Jackie. A lot of it was fairly mundane: movies, nachos, inter-dimensional hunting trips. At first, it was difficult for him to even tell Jackie about making out with Star, or, worse, sleeping with her. It felt wrong to say that to the skateboarder girl. He was pretty sure he would feel at least a bit bad if Jackie were talking about another guy to him. But instead of seeming uncomfortable, she actually pressed him further whenever he mentioned anything in that direction, with a curious look and a smile in her lips. At first he had tried to keep it to the bare minimum, mentioning the fact of when he and Star had slept together and when they hadn’t. But, soon enough, Marco found himself giving his girlfriend a detailed account of his escapades with, well, his other girlfriend. As he described Star riding atop him, Marco felt himself getting aroused by the memory, despite his best efforts. He worried that the girl now sitting on his lap would notice. To his surprise, Jackie reached back and stroked him.

“Heh, sorry,” he muttered.

“About what?” she smiled at him, and turned around to kiss him. “Actually, that does sound pretty hot. Glad you had fun, dude.”

“Are you sure it doesn’t bother you, Jackie?”

“Hey, as long as you don’t get bored of me, and as long as I have you for myself right now, it mostly just turns me on,” she commented. Marco was sure that reaction was getting him harder than even her hand’s attentions. “But, well, is Star alright with it, though?” she added, suddenly pensive.

“I... I don’t know,” Marco replied truthfully. “But, well, she basically arranged this for us. I... I think she is trying to be alright with it. Not sure if that’s a good thing...” Again, Marco wondered what he would do if it were the other way around, if Jackie, or Star, were dating someone else and he had to choose between not dating her or sharing her with another guy. He thought he could do it. Thinking otherwise just felt too hypocritical to consider. But he wasn’t sure.

“Well, Marco, I think it might help if you keep her reassured that you love her too,” Jackie replied. “I mean, it is pretty obvious to me that you do, but it might not be so obvious to her.” She paused
for a moment, looking up into the uncanny sky of the dimension. Finally, she turned back to him with a broad smile. “That said, how about you do that after we have finished enjoying her generous gift. I am getting really curious about that oils and crystal bit.”

They stood up and walked back to the center of the pillow. Marco took his bottle first, looked at it carefully, opened it and smelled its contents. “Wow, this looks like pretty fancy stuff, Jackie, whatever it is. The venetian glass, the full-bodied fragrance, the rich texture of the oils! It is exquisite!”

“And they say Star is the princess,” joked Jackie, amused, as she opened up the other vial and poured a slight stream into her hand. Marco felt her touch on his shoulders, the oil was warm on contact, and he felt quickly relax as it spread on his skin. Jackie’s hands continued along his back. She slapped his glutes softly with damp hands, which for some annoying reason reminded him of Janna. Finally, he caught on and began pouring some of the oil on his own hands, before starting to apply it to Jackie’s torso and soft chest. She gasped, and smiled an easy bright smile at him.

They took a long time to cover each other in the soothing warm liquids, caressing each other’s body calmly as they went along. They explored slowly, comfortably, in a way they had not yet done before. Not on their first time, when nervousness and anticipation prevented such leisure. Not any of the nights Jackie’s parents had been at home, forcing them to be discreet and alert. Not the night of the concert, where excitement and unspoken worries prevailed. They kissed as their hands roamed every inch of each other’s skin.

Their excitement was such that they almost forgot the note, or the steps, or the crystal. Eventually, however, Marco remembered. He grabbed the opaque gemstone-like object with one hand, and pressed the other side against Jackie’s palm. They both felt a jolt of electricity. Marco, more experienced in those matters at least, recognized it as a touch of magical energy.

He felt light. Literally light.

Both of their feet left the ground, as they floated upwards towards the streams of silk.

“Oh, woah, what is this?” Jackie yelled in surprise.

“I don’t know,” Marco replied. He smiled at her reassuringly and pressed on for a deep kiss. After their mouths separated once more, he added, “but I trust Star, so let’s go with it.”

----

Star felt it when the two of them rose above the pillow covered ground. At least, she thought she could feel it.

She had been feeling things all afternoon, things that scared her, and excited her, and amused her. In truth, she was not sure how much was just her imagination, and how much was the link. She had begun thinking about her connection with Marco by that noun: the link. It seemed more palatable to her than considering it a magical bond, or chain, or even string. It was complicated stuff, alright? And it’s not like she had Glossaryck around to ask. Nor would she ever bring this stuff up to her mom, which was the only source of information on her magic she had left!

Whatever it was, it had gotten stronger that whole week, though. Star had often felt a tingle in her lips while in the cafeteria, sitting with Janna, only to look around and catch a glimpse of Marco and Jackie kissing. She still felt a bit envious when that happened, hard as she tried not to. But she also felt a feeling of happiness within her. Likely, that second sentiment came from Marco, through their link. Still, after her conversation with Jackie, she had tried to make that feeling her own. She
wanted to be happy for them, she really did. Sometimes, she even succeeded. Their date tonight was her latest, and most ambitious, effort on that front.

The dimension she had picked was artificially created. A sort of magical extreme version of a popular courting tradition in Mewnie. The place had existed for a long time, and most of the required magic was weaved into the dimension itself. Still, Star had spent a good deal of time at night that week practicing the levitation spell that went into the crystal centerpiece. It was a simple spell, but one she had long been stubbornly uninterested in learning, until she had a real use for it.

She had anticipated getting emotions back from Marco, even across dimensions, as a possibility. She had counted on it! It still surprised her how strong they were. A few minutes after they went through the portal, Star had felt herself blush, for no reason. Then, she briefly sensed the taste of her favorite sandwich in the whole multiverse. That was strange, by the way, since she had never gotten any emotions from Marco regarding food, only regarding things like makeouts and him being in bed with Jackie, or with Star herself. Maybe just eating with someone he liked triggered the link? Maybe the sandwich was just that good!

Not long after, she had felt herself getting warm, and wet. She had wondered if that meant Jackie and Marco were already doing it. She closed her eyes, as it sometimes helped her sense things better, but felt only a wave of calm and reassurance wash through her mind, while still leaving her slightly aroused. Her mind seemed to vividly recall her first time with Marco, as if someone were recounting it to her.

Now she sat in her bed, in her room, and she felt herself surprised out of nowhere, followed by a happy light elation. She was pretty sure they had used the crystal. There was no way for her to sense the crystal itself, of course, but the feelings had to be coming from Marco and matched her own when she had tested the spell. Star felt her heart quicken and her cheeks glow bright red. She wondered if the arousal came from Marco, or from her own fantasies about taking the boy out to that place. The princess felt regret at having given that up by sending him with Jackie instead, then she felt guilty about that regret. Those feelings, clearly, came from within.

She closed her eyes and opened them in shock once again! She had seen a flash of Jackie’s naked body pressed against an ocean green silk fabric, Marco’s delicious naked torso pressing against her, kissing her passionately. Was she imagining that, or could she really watch them? No, it clearly was the truth. The image had been unmistakably real. She had seen them once, when actively casting the All-Seeing Eye spell, and that was clearly the origin of the link. She had also caught some very vivid flashes that night with, well, with Tom. But this time the images were even more detailed and clear, so much so that it was impossible for her to honestly confuse them with her own imagination. How much stronger was the link now than then?

The mewman girl took a deep breath and closed her eyes again. At first, it was only darkness. Then she saw the bright pulsating spheres of light and green mist she had seen a week ago, when she was with Marco. Except this time, fainter, dimmer, further away, there was a third sphere. Star focused on that sphere and was hit by a wave of strong pleasurable sensations, mostly centered around her left breast. Then, the picture shifted again.

“Oooh, Diaz,” Jackie exclaimed, as her boyfriend’s lips and tongue enveloped her left nipple. Star could see it clearly now, from a comfortable third person perspective. The naked human girl sliding upwards slowly along the silk ribbon, skin glistening with sensual oil. Marco’s lean muscular body pressing against her, shiny as well with the scented liquid. His hand was reaching between his girlfriend’s legs, easily slipping in between her folds, given the external, and internal, lubrication.
Star felt those fingers too. Sort of. The sensations seemed muted compared to being there, but only barely. Still, instinctively, she reached between her own legs, adding her physical stimulation to the psychic one she was receiving. Emotions vied for control of her mind: jealousy at Jackie, which she tried to fight; guilt at spying on her friends once more, which she sought to ignore; overpowering elation, which she attempted to kindle.

“Jackie, slide up!” called Marco. With great athletic dexterity, the girl complied, pushing herself faster upwards along the floating fabric. As her belly reached face height with him, Marco stopped her with his hands on her waist, and began kissing the inside of her thighs. Star felt herself shiver and her mouth wet, somehow linked now to both of their sensations. A green gleam seemed to pervade the edge of her vision, but it left the scene in front of her unimpeded.

Marco’s tongue darted inside the skateboarder girl, eliciting a loud moan of pleasure. As he moved under her, Star felt his tongue lap around her own crotch, tracing an intricate dancing pattern. She felt her legs buckle, even as she sat, and then, she felt them not at all. She discovered, briefly, that she could not move or open her eyes. But instead of terrified, she felt at ease, and yet, hot.

Jackie moaned in pleasure and Star’s mind replicated the sensations. Marco and the girl rolled over, sliding out from a side of the silk ribbon, falling slowly upwards. Floating in mid-air, they climbed atop each other’s body, until their mouths met in a kiss and, seconds later, Marco’s member penetrated her. For infinitely long seconds they made love in mid-air: weightless, unconstrained, impossibly intimate. There, tethered to nothing but each other, Marco rhythmically thrust into Jackie, as she wrapped her arms and legs around him, pulling him towards her with all her strength and desire. Eventually they landed into another, higher, silk ribbon of a soft pink hue. There they continued the motions, faster, more savagely, racing together towards the inevitable release.

It was impossible for Star to feel jealousy then. How could she envy Jackie, when she felt every wonderful thing the human girl felt? How could she be angry that Marco was with someone else, when it brought him such joy and pleasure, and she felt what he felt as well? With every thrust, every moan, every pair of hands grasping the aerial sheets, she felt both of their sensations. An overwhelming mix of emotions and physical stimuli, too strong for a single mind to contain.

There was an instant there, in which Star knew, truly knew, that Marco did love her, and that he loved Jackie too. She also knew Jackie liked and admired Star, on a visceral level. She knew as well what her own feelings were. Star knew she could make this work, this whole thing. Marco, Jackie, the spell, the link, whatever it was. Dark magic or not.

But then she knew something else. She knew there was a fourth mind in there with them, alien and distant, laughing at the smallness of her epiphany. A green smirking chasm of unearthly force, that knew the horrifying cost behind all happily ever afters. That thought slipped from her mind just an instant after, as did her certainty about the other two. Forgetting all but the scene she now witnessed.

A level removed, however, she could still see their movements, and feel their mounting arousal. She could feel Marco inside of her just as well as Jackie herself could, and she felt also the, to her, strange sensations of doing the same act from Marco’s perspective.

“Maaaaarco!” she called, exactly as Jackie did.

“Jackiee!” she heard Marco call, and almost followed suit herself.

A synchronized wave of pleasure hit all three minds as their bodies climaxed as one. Two together in a silky support, one alone in her room, in a dimension far away.
“Wow, Marco, remind me to like, get Star the biggest gift I can possibly come up with for her birthday...” Jackie finally spoke, gasping. Slowly, their bodies began descending back into the ocean of pillows. Marco smiled and held on tightly onto his girlfriend’s frame. “Better yet, bring her here, and... eh... thank her on my behalf.” She laughed.

“Oh, don’t worry, I plan to!” Marco announced, with a smirk, which earned him a mock punch on the shoulder.

Star smiled at them, as the scene faded from her mind and she felt herself return to her body and to her room. She felt her jealousy melt, at least for now. She felt so happy about her friends, so hopeful for the future, and only slightly embarrassed about having spied on them again.

She also felt scared, somewhere deep in her mind, and she didn’t know why.

----

END of Part I

Chapter End Notes

Extra-long (Somewhat Historical) Author's Note:

So, here you have it, ladies and gentlemen. The end... of the beginning. To everyone's surprise, it ends on Jarco! ;) (Season 3 intro be damned)

First of all, for those who are long time readers of this fic, apologies for the month-long hiatus. Life got just slightly overwhelming from mid May to now. I knew that was going to be the case ahead of time, but I thought I could get Chapter 9, and thus the end of the arc, out, before I became too busy. At some point, though, the decision became between postponing Chapter 9 until now, or rushing it badly. I opted for the former. I will do my best to resume weekly or biweekly posting, starting Part II within two weeks from now.

One thing I haven't decided, is how to publish Part II and beyond. This whole thing started as outright porn on adult-fanfiction.org, with only the first chapter planned originally, and grew from there. Part I, thus, can be at best characterized as porn with plot, and I have tried my best to cram a sex scene per chapter. I don't think that's what I want to do with Part II. Don't get me wrong, there will still be pretty detailed smut, but the idea is the plot will take the center stage, and most chapters will not contain a sex scene. Instead, I might do a big sex scene every 3 or 4 chapters, to accompany, but not define, the plot. So, given that, and not being that familiar with AO3 conventions, what do people suggest: a) Continue story in same fic? b) Continue story in M rated fic in same series, with optional E-rated smut chapters? c) Continue story in E-rated fic which will only occasionally live up to the rating?

Either way, things to look forward to, if you have enjoyed this so far:

More poly-V actual Starco+Jarco relationship!

More strange, BDSM-y, sorta messed up, Jantom!
Mystery Big Bad and actual world(s)-level stakes!

Aaaand... "Face the Music" will still be in continuity! (Season 3 almost certainly won't be, though)
Chapter Summary

In which preparations for a grand event are underway, happy relationships abound, a princess rebels against authority, Janna gives her views as to the institution of the monarchy, and Glossaryck makes a speech about rivers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part II: Princess Song

Chapter 10: Under the Shimmer, and Rubies and Pearls

**Continuity stardate:** Chapters 10 to 12 take place during the span of SvtFoE episode “Face the Music” (S02E21), but the timeline has diverged enough that some important scenes will play out very differently from canon. Previous episodes are in continuity for this fic, episodes after S02E21, generally speaking, are not.

The boundless topography of pan-dimensional space stretched out in its unimaginably vast cardinality, yet his eyes surveyed all of its limitless contours. The endlessly forking streams of possibility and converging river mouths of inevitability extended into the unfathomable horizon of time itself, yet his gaze could travel far among the paths, to the deaths and births of universes. For he was mighty Omnitraxus Prime, master of space and custodian of time.

Today, however, the great Omnitraxus found himself vexed and perturbed. For weeks he had peered into the structure of infinity itself, trying to find the destination of the magical drain. Now, a terrifying new layer had affixed itself to the issue. One that was completely unforeseen, even by one such as himself, mighty among the mighty, wise among the wise.

Somehow, magic had started flowing out of many regions of the cosmos at once, across dimensions, sometime around a month and a half ago, relative to the Mewni time stream. His core region of the multiverse, spanning Mewni and a billion other major dimensions, seemed to be central to the disruption. But it was not the drain itself that preoccupied Omnitraxus. The original drain was a foreseen event, tied to a fate he understood, even if only in the broadest of strokes. It was a fate that involved him and the royal family, and which would lead to his death, albeit perhaps only temporarily. But, more importantly, it would also lead to a satisfactory conclusion for a long standing wrinkle in this part of the great infinity. It was a shock that had to happen; a necessary stanza in the symphony of existence. He could read that much in the big picture, in the larger scale of the flows of destiny through the multiverse, and so, he had not dared look any further into his own role.

Today, however, the song of the multiverse was discordant. The streams of possible futures had shifted, and the entire tone and direction of all that was, all that would and could be, had been yanked towards a much darker conclusion, with all the elegance of a reluctant dog being forcefully
pulled by the leash. The magic drain was flowing somewhere else. Fate and destiny had been altered. The continuum itself had been knocked from its primordial tracks. Worst of all, it had happened right under Omnitraxus’ skeletal nose.

There were safewards to the health of time and space, custodians of the correctness of the cosmos. Omnitraxus was one of them. For the sake of the more linear beings he called his friends, he hoped he could fix this, before any less gentle hand had to become involved.

Despite his vast powers, Omnitraxus Prime was not all-knowing. With but a thought, he could see any one place in space and any one point in time along any of the many paths of probability which lay before him, but that did not help him when he did not know at least the general nature of that which he sought. Neither did Omnitraxus know which locations or events were involved in the cosmical aberration at hand. Thus, he had already begun the laborious process of following the threads in the tapestry of time towards the origin of the change, tracing each unexpected event to its proximal cause, then that one to its own.

The dissonant elements went back further than he originally had expected. Large alterations were perceptible through a period of many weeks, once he was aware of the general bent of the change. It was possible that the more subtle origins of the abnormality stretched into long gone millenia, but they had grown the most in the last dozen days or so, incubating barely below the threshold of his powerful awareness. Nevertheless, he would locate the original damage and correct it, for he was Omnitraxus Prime. What were to him a few weeks, or even a thousand years, out of eons of time? What were a few dimensions out of the incalculable expanse of multiversal space?

But what the boundless Omnitraxus did not anticipate, was that, as he himself pursued, the source of the change sought him out as well.

It was a split second before he noticed the viridescent malignancy embedded within his own core, the spider web of corrosive magic crisscrossing the crystal fields near his nucleus. He felt the drained magic converge into his core self with supernal force, with undeniable purpose, and saw the path of his own existence approach its final destination.

He became suddenly aware that the streams all converged in front of him, into an inescapable future that excluded the possibility of his own permanence. In the face of true and final death, his greatest regret was to never have figured the mystery of such an unexpected unraveling of providence itself. And that he hadn’t been able to spare his friends the cataclysm that would surely follow.

“Who are you?” Omnitraxus asked, with his last words.

“I am hope, triumphant!” the voice in the void responded.

Then the mighty Omnitraxus Prime was no more.

-----

“Perfect Princess Moon, she’s great in every way. Everything she says and does is absolutely right...”

Star made a face and tried her best to suppress an annoyed groan. Her mother, Moon the Undaunted, Queen of Mewni, and the subject of such a saccharine paean, either did not notice, or pretended not to. On the other side of the magic mirror, Star’s mom kept looking at the aging songstrel with a pleasant, although entirely non-committal royal smile. Moon also seemed not to hear the faint stifled giggling coming from the left of Star.
“Her hair is silky soft. Her favorite color’s pink. She flosses every day, and she never needs to sleep!”

Did her mom even like pink? Star rarely saw Moon wearing anything other than blue. The barely visible bags under Moon’s eyes also told Star that, whatever the song said, her mom would certainly benefit from some more shut eye time in her busy schedule.

“The perfect Princess Moon, she’s nice in every way. Always in a sunny mood, even on the cloudy days.”

A sunny mood? She could count the times a week her mom wore a genuine smile with the fingers of one hand, and that was when she lived with her in Mewni. Wait, was it because Star lived with her in Mewni that Moon did not smile regularly? The self-doubting thought wormed into the mewman girl’s mind before she quickly dismissed it for the falsehood it was. Nah. As much as the young princess caused Queen Moon no end of troubles, she was fairly certain that her mother loved her and was happier with Star around than without her. It was just that there seemed to be very little joy that the job of ruling Mewni didn’t take away from you. Star grimaced. That was a depressing thought that she found much harder to suppress.

“Her sugar-coated heart of gold will make everything fine. She plays with puppies and kisses kitty cats, eats her veggies and smells like lavender.”

Star grimaced again. But it was a less heavy frown than the last, directed mostly at how absurd and forced those lyrics were. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Marco silently lifting up a laser puppy, while Jackie leaned towards the boy to exaggeratedly smell his hair, parodying the verses. Now it was the princess time to be forced to conceal a chuckle. Fortunately the angle of the mirror did not allow her mom to spot the two humans, who were sitting on her bed, so long as they kept quiet.

“Perfect Princess Moon. She’s a fan of smiles. Perfect Princess Moon will be our que-ee-e-e-e-een!”

The songstrel ended the awful piece, and Moon clapped approvingly. Star could not stand it any more, “Ugghh! Mom! Worst. Song. Ever. Do I have to have one of those written about me?”

“Yes, Star. It’s a tradition as old as the kingdom itself,” her mother calmly explained. It was a tradition due for abolishment, if you asked the princess, like so many corny pointless old ceremonies. Her irritated face made her opinion on the matter amply clear. Moon, undaunted, continued with even greater enthusiasm, “and is your official introduction as Future Queen to the people of Mewni!”

Star’s mocking response about how generic the song was, was met with a much less approving tone from the queen. Mother dear made it pretty clear that plans for Star’s Song Day were well underway, and that she had already sent one of those awful songstrels her way. Moreover, the princess’ feelings on the matter did not make a lick of difference on that either.

“Hmmmmmm... fine,” Star relented, or seemed too. There was no point in arguing with her mom when it got to this point. She would deal with the songstrel instead, or rather, not deal with him. Avoidance and making herself scarce had always worked better for her in the past, when she had to get out of annoying ceremonies and royal events, compared with trying to change the queen’s mind.

“And remember, Star, the people of Mewnie like their Princess Songs light and fluffy,” Moon added, unhelpfully. The last thing that Star wanted associated with her right now was a light and
fluffy piece, specially if that also meant one as devoid of any individual personality as her mom’s had been. “Do you think you can handle that?

“Yes, mom,” Star said by way of sullen goodbye and hung up on the mirror, carefully choosing words that her mother would interpret as an agreement on the course of action, while she could later claim to have meant only as an acknowledgement. She could handle it. She just wasn’t going to. She would not even meet the damn songstrel, if she could help it.

“So, Star, dude, are we going the be able to go see this Song Day of yours?” Jackie asked with a grin, clearly oblivious to the plans brewing in the princess’ head. “I’ve never been to Mewni. Sounds way fun!”

Jackie’s head leaned to rest on Marco’s shoulder, as her hand rested on the boy’s upper leg. Though there were clear limits they did not cross, both Star and Marco had become a lot more comfortable respectively seeing and partaking in that sort of affectionate displays when the three of them were alone together. Jackie herself probably had never had a problem with Star and Marco showing affection, but the princess was still in the process of getting fully used to that part, beyond their effusive friendly hugs. So, mostly, it was the princess watching the two human teens flirt and show their affection.

It surprised Star how quickly such gestures had gone from making her feel envious and insecure, to feeling just right. Truth be told, Marco and Jackie were adorable together. It also helped that Marco’s love for Star seemed just as genuine as the one he displayed for the other girl, and that Jackie and herself had been becoming closer and closer as friends as well.

Nonetheless, despite their recent closeness, Star had not even thought of inviting Jackie. Originally, she had figured out that if she had to bring a friend, if she absolutely was unable to extricate herself from that awful Song Day tradition, then it would be Marco. Then again, why not invite both him and Jackie? Again, she was a very dear friend, and is not like the three of them hadn’t learned to be discreet about their arrangement. Maybe Janna could go too? But still, there was a part of Star that did not want to have to introduce Jackie, or, if she was fully honest with herself, Jackie’s relationship with Marco, to her family. “There is not going to be a Song Day, Jackie! There is no way I am getting one of those insipid awful songs written about me!”

“But...” Marco pleaded, giving her puppy eyes - double puppy eyes, since he was still holding the laser puppy too, who eyed her as well. Then, breaking into a good natured mocking sing-song voice, the boy added, “But, perfect princess Star, you are supposed to be nice in every way!” He laughed.

The princess would have been hurt hearing that from anyone else, but something about Marco mocking how little the song applied to Star actually made her feel better about the whole thing. That said, no way he was going to get away with making fun of her like that. Star walked up to Marco slowly, with a bright cheerful smile... and punched him in the arm. See if he found that ‘nice’.

“Ohw,” Marco winced. Jackie gave him a sympathetic look, followed by a shrug. She knew he deserved that one, and so did he. “Ok, ok, Star, fine, that song was awful, and obviously it says nothing about your mom, or you for that matter. But I still think it might be easier to just go along with it and don’t let it bother you. It will keep your mom off your back, and, well, what’s the worst that could happen?”

----

“Well, this is... unexpected,” the monster spoke in a deadly cold voice. It was not to his advantage.
to show his surprise in his tone, and thus, he did not. But truth was, he was puzzled. Everything up to this point had gone, generally speaking, according to plan. His manipulations had worked almost to perfection so far. The princess and Ludo had both proven utterly predictable: puppets unaware of their own strings. Up until now, Ludo knew nothing, even as Toffee extended his pawn’s hand to use the wand he now inhabited.

The ‘borrowed’ magic under his command had been growing by the day. That is, of course, until earlier that morning. Now he felt it being pulled away from him, redirected somewhere else. Maybe Star had found a way to fight him? To drain the magic from the other end of the wand? No, impossible, the child could not possibly understand enough to do so, she had not even realized he was siphoning the magic away, not once had she noticed in all these months. Moon then, perhaps? Preposterous! The high commission? No, they all put together couldn’t find a giant hydra in the middle of a shallow corn field.

“Glossaryck, I don’t suppose you’d tell me what is happening,” he ventured. He hardly trusted the little man. ‘I don’t have a side’ meant he wasn’t secretly looking for a chance to help Star, and maybe, just maybe, he was even truthful about that. But it also meant he had no particular reason to look after Toffee’s interests either.

“Well, the magic is flowing elsewhere,” Glossaryck replied, without elaboration. Typical. Well, it was better than a direct refusal.

“I see that,” he observed. Two green glowing eyes, not truly his own, but no longer Ludo’s either, narrowed dangerously. “Where is it flowing to, and why?”

“Hard to tell,” the little blue man replied, unfazed. He sat crossing his legs, floating in mid air.

“Is it flowing back?” Toffee pressed on.

“Well... no, not exactly,” Glossaryck replied, as his whole body rolled around an axis parallel to the ground, his head ending upside down as he seemed to examine something on Toffee’s wand crystal.

“Then, where?” the monster kept his tone controlled, there was no use in angry demands when it came to the book’s inhabitant. Besides, if Glossaryck was trying to hide something, calm and care were what was called for, in order to spot the evasions and to ask the right questions.

“I don’t know,” was the response. Ludo’s eyes grew wide under the other monster’s control.

“You don’t know? Does this mean you don’t know now or you can’t know, little man?” Toffee finally grinned, feeling sure that he had figured out the magic being’s game. “I know you can see into the future. Are you saying there is no way for you to answer my question, despite that?”

“See into the future? See into the future? Mmmm... Toffee, there is not such a thing as ‘the future’, not in the singular at least,” Glossaryck declared by way of a response, rolling on the spot again so that he was no longer upside down, then floating to position himself at arm length from the immortal monster’s borrowed face and emphasizing the quotes around ‘the future’ with his fingers. “You see, time is like a stream, one which is constantly bifurcating...”

“Yes, Glossaryck, I understand possible and probable futures well enough,” he cut him off, annoyed. No way he was going to let this discussion get sidetracked into a lecture, specially one as basic as that one. “Are you saying time took a path you were not expecting, one that was different from the future or futures you foresaw, then?”
“No,” Glossaryck shock his head. Then his tongue slowly flowed out from his mouth, scratching
his own left ear, before he continued. “Toffee, yesterday the most likely future had Moon
confronting you tomorrow night. In all but a few streams you kill her... she gets better,” the little
man clarified as he saw the monster’s malevolent smirk.

“That future no longer exists, nor any of those around it,” Sir Glossaryck of Terms continued, in a
grave tone. “It doesn’t exist even if you were to muck around with time. It is no longer a possible
future, not even in the past. Mmmmhh... how do I explain this? We didn’t take ‘another path’ down
the stream of time. This is more like, well, like somebody threw a bunch of boulders on time,
blocking the river altogether, and now we are flowing down completely unexplored paths through
the mountain’s cliff-side...”

Well, that was worrying. Very worrying indeed. Decades of planning, gone. His future, a future in
which he apparently won, gone too. For the first time in years, Toffee’s controlled facade cracked
ever so slightly, and he groaned in frustration.

----

“Greetings, princess Star! I am... Ruberiot!” the man introduced himself. He looked like he had
been pulled right out of a ren faire, dressed in the most stereotypical minstrel costume imaginable.
A lute hung in front of him, supported by a strap on his shoulder. Without so much as looking or
taking a step inside, he began playing a few cords. “And maaay I just saaaay, thought we have
much to dooo, how much of a pleasure it is to meeet...”, the tune broke abruptly as he finally
looked up, “…you?”

“So... she is kinda not home right now,” Marco answered wearily. His arguments, and Jackie’s for
that matter, had fallen on deaf ears. Star was determined that no stupid song should be written
about her, not today, nor any time soon. Meeting the songstrel in the flesh, Marco could see why
his best friend felt that way.

“But, that can’t be right! Maybe she did not know I was to be sent here today? You see, the
Songday Ceremony is tomorrow, and...” Ruberiot rambled on, visibly anxious.

“Oh, I would say she knows,” the boy cut him off.

“Well, kind sir, would you know where I may find princess Star today, then?” Ruberiot asked
apprehensively. “Please, I assure you this is urgent.”

“No clue,” Marco answered honestly and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, if that’s all. It was nice
meeting you, have a great day!” He made a gesture to close the door and extricate himself from the
whole situation as soon as possible.

“Actually, perhaps I could wait for her inside?” the songstrel pressed on, and putting a foot on the
door, he saw himself in before Marco could reply.

“Man, I don’t know where Star is, or when she is coming back, really! I swear!” Marco protested.

“Well, she does live here, right? So I have a better chance of meeting her on time if I wait here than
if I try to search for her in an unknown dimension. Oh, I just hope she has not traveled far,”
Ruberiot bemoaned. That seemed, to Marco, like the right verb, for that peculiar person: bemoan.
“Pardon, but, what did you say your name was?”

“I am Marco, Marco Diaz,” he answered with a sigh, as he walked back to sit on the couch. “I am
Star’s roommate and,” he paused, unsure, “...and best friend.”
“The princess’ best friend? What an honor!” Ruberiot exclaimed. “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to be so rude before. You must understand, I am quite nervous to finally get to meet her as well, and to perform such an important task as writing her Princess Song!”

Well, yeah, it sort of was an honor, Marco thought to himself. But not for the reasons the songstrel probably thought. It was not an honor because of the fact that Star was a princess, let alone the type of perfect princess described in the sort of song he had heard last night. Rather, it was an honor because of who Star was as a person: boundlessly enthusiastic, generous, adventurous, trouble creating and trouble resolving. Star was the best friend one could ever hope for, and an amazing girlfriend as well. Plenty of times these days, Marco still had a hard time coming to terms with the fact that someone like Star liked him back, an honor indeed.

But even for the sake of Star, dealing with the annoying minstrel was a test to Marco’s patience and nerves. Ruberiot spent hours on end playing his lute and singing at him increasingly desperate songs asking about where Star might have gone. If Marco had known the specifics, he would have cracked after the first two or three hours, such was the depth of the torture involved in listening to that man. He could not watch tv, he could not even do homework. He tried distracting the songstrel with conversation, but somehow he always seemed to break into song at the third or fourth response and it was even worse than what he got by ignoring him.

So when the doorbell finally rang again, it was Marco that bolted up to the door like lightning. “Star! So glad you are back!”

“Whoa, Diaz, wrong girlfriend,” the blond girl at the door replied chidingly. “Guess now I know who you miss the most.”

She was dressed in white. A white, padded, seemingly single piece, suit. A fencing suit, actually. She carried a training foil in one hand and her trademark skateboard in the other.

“Jackie... I didn’t mean... it’s just...” Marco stammered. “Wait, why are you wearing a fencing uniform? I thought you stopped taking lessons back in 6th grade.”

“I know you didn’t, Marco,” she laughed. “I am just pulling your leg. And, well, I am trying to get back into fencing. I guess the whole giant snake thing got me thinking... you have your sweet karate moves, Star’s got magic, I need something more than my board if I am going to keep up with you guys. I don’t want to make a habit of being the damsel in distress, even if you make a pretty sweet handsome knight. Mmmm, by the way, how did you know I took fencing lessons back in elementary school, dude?”

“Well, ah, Jackie, you know I paid a lot of attention to you since back then,” Marco ran a hand through the back of his hair.

Jackie smiled, moved the sword to one side and pushed forward to plant a deep kiss on Marco’s lips. “Stalker!” she jokingly admonished him.

Behind them, lute silent for once, Ruberiot stared at the two in quiet surprise.

----

“Hey, Janna Banana! So glad to see you!” the princess greeted her with a hug, as she literally landed in front of her, having jumped from a pink talking cloud.

“Yo, Star,” Janna replied, briefly returning the hug before offering her fist to be bumped. To her surprise, Star handled the gesture perfectly and bumped fists with her without a hitch. Clearly
hanging out with Jackie was rubbing off on the princess. Speaking of which, better to cut to the chase “So, Star, is this by any chance a boys’ trouble shopping trip again?”

“What? No! Why would you think that?” Star asked. Janna resisted the urge of saying something sarcastic, but the mewman sounded sincere enough. “Things are going great with Marco. Weird, but mostly weird-awesome. No. It is, well, it is this stupid royal tradition... apparently I have to have a song written about how I love puppies and kitty cats, and smiles! Ugh!”

“But, eh, Star, well... don’t you? Love puppies and kitty cats, and smiles, I mean?” Janna questioned her, a bit surprised. Star might be a rebel, but she did love all sort of girly things, like puppies and rainbows.

“Well, ok, yeah, I do. But, well, they will make it sound like that’s all there is... to... to me. You should have heard my mom’s song, there was nothing about the real her in that song, and there will not be anything about the real me in mine!” Star griped. “The people of Mewni will never know me as more than another perfect, flawless, boring, princess!”

“Well, fuck them then!” Janna replied without hesitating.

“Janna! I don’t think that’s the part of me I want the people of Mewnie to know either! And besides, that’s a lot of people, and most are kinda not my type, like, at all,” Star replied, surprised and quite flustered.

What? Oh, right, seemed Star was still not completely used to Earth, apparently. “No, Star, I don’t mean literally. I mean, who cares what they think!? If you don’t want to do a Song Day, don’t do it! Aren’t you the future queen? You have the power to do whatever you please, and off with their heads or whatever if they don’t agree!”

“If only it were that simple. My mom is forcing me to do this Song Day stuff. I am trying to hide from the whole thing right now. Hopefully, if they can’t find me, this stuff will eventually blow over,” Star explained with a sigh. “And, Janna, I mean, I wouldn’t be chopping any heads over this, even if I could.”

“Well, you take all the fun away from being a witch queen,” Janna retorted, trying to distract Star from her bad mood.

“Being queen takes all the fun away from being queen, Janna,” Star retorted sourly.

“I doubt that!” Janna insisted. Ok, the law was not fun. But, being the law was a completely different matter. “If I were the magical queen of Mewni, I would make it fun! I would use the power to get everything my heart desires. All shall love me and despair!” she quoted, dramatically.

Star laughed. “Whatever you say... Eclipsa.”

“Who?”

“Let’s just say you would probably like her,” Star replied mysteriously.

They walked around the mall some more, and Janna’s ever more brazen jokes about how she would abuse Star’s power and what she would do to anyone who tried to tell her what to do seemed to slowly help lift up the princess’ mood. Star might have a problem with being thought of as a perfect princess, but when compared to Janna’s outrageous declarations of what she would do with the crown, and the wand, she had to admit she was a good kid at heart. Then again, even Janna suspected, that in the real situation, she herself would also be less willing to walk the tyrant walk than she was to talk the tyrant talk.
“So, Star, now that we have established how terrible of an idea would be to give me any kind of power, how would you feel if I told you I am going to be learning magic?” Janna suddenly asked. She had been thinking on how to bring up that particular topic the entire morning, and while her segue ended up not being the smoothest, it would have to do for now.

“Uh... Janna, that would be great and all, but... I don’t think magic, at least my kind of magic, is something that humans can learn,” Star answered hesitantly. “Most mewman’s can’t, either.”

“Well, Star, I don’t think it will be exactly your kind of magic,” Janna explained, carefully. She herself had her doubts about whether what she had heard last night was possible. However, given any chance, she chose to believe. “But Tom says he knows a way, and he is going to teach me. Starting late tonight he is going to be tutoring me on doing some magic.”

Star made a face, a show of discomfort quickly morphing into the rictus of contained laughter. Janna knew Star didn’t like her talking about Tom, specially since the troublemaker girl never paid heed to the princess’ heartfelt warnings in that regard, but this time there seemed to be something else to her reaction. “Suuure you are, Janna... sorry, but are you sure ‘tutoring you on doing magic at night’ isn’t just Tom’s way of, you know...?”

“Of getting me alone at night for a quick game of bury the third horn? Of inviting me into a dark deserted area so that he can have his way with me? Of getting me chained and on all fours again to fuck me?” Janna asked Star loudly and unashamedly, and the mewman made an expression of surprise, revulsion and something else, far less innocent. Janna felt a tingle of delight in teasing Star this way. “Frankly, Star, I am kind of hoping it is both that and actual magic.”

----

It was sunset by the time she got back, so hopefully by now that whole annoying business with the songstrel had long resolved itself. Hanging out with Janna had been good for her nerves. Unlike her other friends, and to Star’s surprise, the troublemaker girl had encouraged her to ditch her royal duties as much as possible, or at least ignore the responsibilities inherent in them, which was a refreshing point of view to hear. Then again, Janna was also the person who couldn’t stop telling her about how great was to date Tom, so Star had to admit the dark-haired girl’s judgment was extremely suspect. Still, she would rather go live of toads in the Forest of Certain Death than have a ridiculous song made about how she was sooo perfect, and flawless, and boring.

Star walked the last few blocks on foot, after dismounting Cloudy, which allowed her to see Jackie leaning in through the door, kissing Marco. Star smiled. It had taken her a while to get to that point, but she no longer felt panicked or threatened when she saw the two of them being affectionate with each other and, she had to admit, once she got past that particular reaction, she found the two lovebirds actually looked quite sweet.

“Awwww, you two,” she said, coming up from behind Jackie’s back, after they were done kissing.

The other girl turned around with a smile. “Hey, Star, how’s it going?”

“You know, same old, same old,” Star replied, not wanting to talk about either the Song Day or Janna’s dating life. “Sweet sword, by the way, the point looks a bit dull, though!” she commented. Honestly, the compliment part was mostly her being polite. The sword was a pretty flimsy thing, and it didn’t look like it would do much in a real fight. Maybe she could help Jackie get a better sword later? It seemed to be one of those things that Mewni craftsmen did way better than Earth ones, for some reason.

“Princess Star, you are back!” a voice from inside the house interrupted her planning and brought a
frown to her face.

“Ah, the songstrel... well, goodbye,” she replied, and turned on the spot. Maybe she would have to be gone until after Song Day had passed altogether. She could do that.

“Please, princess, I have a job to do, and I can’t leave until it’s done,” Ruberiot scrambled after her.

“And I won’t stay, until you are gone.” she replied, annoyed.

Soon she was arguing back and forth with the songstrel, her good humor gone. Eventually, Marco, also visibly annoyed, pulled her into the kitchen. Apparently the insufferable man had spent his time throwing song after annoying song at the boy too. Didn’t Marco get that was partly why she didn’t want that kind of creep writing a song about her? Specially one as fake and barf-inducing as the one her mom had?

“It’s ok, Star. Even if the song turns out really dumb, that’s not what the people of Mewni will remember you for,” the boy reassured her. “They will remember you as the girl who set a rainbow on fire!”

“Gee, thanks, Marco,” she replied rolling her eyes. She really should have never told him about her fourteenth birthday, or about how exactly she had ended up being sent to Earth.

“...and as the rebel princess who fights monsters. And as the princess who burned Ludo’s castle to the ground to rescue her best friend, who faced Toffee and won.” His tone became softer and more serious now. He brushed a hand over her hair as he spoke, “They won’t remember you as a boring perfect princess, because you won’t let them. You will keep on riding wild unicorns, fighting monsters, and kicking all sorts of butt. Who cares about what a dumb song that says about you, when everyone that’s actually looking can see who you really are!”

“Aww, thanks Marco!” she beamed back at him, surprised how much it helped her to hear him say that. To be reassured that she was not another cookie cutter princess in a line of cookie cutter perfect princesses, or, more precisely, that the people she truly cared about in her life didn’t and wouldn’t see her that way, no matter what tradition and dumb princess songs said. She couldn’t hold herself from hugging Marco and planting a long passionate kiss on his lips.

“He’s, uh, he’s staring at us, isn’t he?” she asked after they pulled apart.

“Yup,” Marco answered.

Ruberiot looked at them, then looked at Jackie who was sitting right besides him in the couch, her sword resting in the small table in front of them. The human girl just shrugged like it was no big deal.

Chapter End Notes

"and, well, what’s the worst that could happen?" - Marco Diaz :)


Janna sat immobile in the darkness, eyes closed. She could hear the rustling of the leaves and the beating of her own heart. She could feel the hard cold barren ground under her buttocks and crossed legs, even through the black fabric of her tights. She could remember the position of the gravestones around her, the markings for the tombs beneath. Or maybe, just maybe, she could sense them.

It was not her first, not even her second time attempting to cast a spell in the Echo Creek cemetery. But it was her second time to do so with help, and unlike the clown séance with Star, this time her instructor seemed more experienced in the kind of arts that she sought out, the kind that could be taught.

“Don’t open your eyes,” Tom instructed as he grabbed her hands and positioned them in front of her, making her cup the air within her palms and placing her two thumbs touching each other above the form. “I want you to picture all of the sources of energy close around you: me, yourself, the trees, the grass, the worms in the Earth, the bodies interred here, the maggots inside those bodies. You might also be able to feel the animals of the forest or the people back in town, but ignore them for now. Draw energy from those close to you. You should probably try to ignore my energy too, at first, since the forces in your own dimension should be easier to control. Got it? Can you feel it all? Once you can, try to form the flame.”

Janna felt the things Tom described. It had taken her five or six hours just to get to this point, but she could indeed sense the living energies around her. She felt the slow pulsing power flowing up the trunk of a nearby tree. She also felt the background magical radiation of the dry grass around them. Although insignificant individually, each blade of dying grass added its own power to a surprisingly large and powerful whole.

The burrowing worms and the human corpses below were much less comforting to her senses than the plant life was. In the case of the worms, as in that of the maggots, the main problem was the speed at which their energies moved through their diminutive bodies, brisk and electrified, tiny
sparks of restless animus.

The force in the corpses, by contrast, was stagnant and deep. It was a water well which bottom she could not see even as her mind skimmed the surface. She had the distinct impression of there being something ancient and terrible on the far end of that abyss, something that looked back at her from an unfathomable distance, even as she peered into the slowly shrinking pools of vital power left behind inside the inanimate bodies. She shivered. Touching the energies of the dead felt instinctively wrong to her mind, in a way that had no analogy to any other sensation of which she knew. Janna did not believe in any one single god, and her own faith was, let’s say, complex, as to the subject of cosmic transgression. Nonetheless, there was only one word that truly fit the feeling, regardless of rationalizations: sacrilegious.

She could sense Tom too, like a huge eclipsing dark shadow in the corner of her perception. Yet her mind refused to focus on him directly, or to feel out any details about his unearthly energies. Tom was the most powerful source of magic for miles around, and yet her own senses refused to let her draw from that vast wellspring. The demon prince had explained that it was to be expected, that it was a good thing. It meant Janna’s own instincts were shielding her from doing something that could hurt her.

Minutes passed by, and nothing changed. She could feel the energy in the tree, in the grass, in the corpses and the maggots, but she could not do anything with those forces. She focused on the task at hand, her first spell: a simple candle flame floating inside the palm of her hands. Nothing happened. No flame and no magic. It was no use. She could touch the energies around, but it was like grasping at currents of water with a fishing net, the power simply slid out of her grasp at every attempt.

Janna felt stupid, and more so with each passing second. Perhaps she had only imagined that she could sense the magic around her. Perhaps there was nothing more here than a foolish girl sitting in a graveyard with her eyes closed, playing make believe for most of the night. Could it be that Tom was playing a prank on her? Was he laughing at her as he made her sit for hours and imagine that she felt sparks inside of worms?

She felt her anger break her concentration. She could no longer even feel the damn tree, let alone all the things in the ground below. She grunted annoyed and tried once again. She pulled forth the power, hastily, desperately. She grasped out at any source of energy she could still sense and drew it to her hands with all the willpower she could muster. She felt a hot painful sensation in her left palm, a fountain of tiny sparks sprouted briefly from her flesh, vanishing a second later. “Ouch!” she cried, opening her eyes in surprise.

Tom looked at her, frowning. “Mmmhm, let me see!” He yanked her hand towards him and examined her palm. “Here it is burned,” he said, carelessly pressing a finger against the damaged skin, causing Janna to wince, “and the rest of your hands are cold as a dead woman’s. That’s not good, at all. We can’t continue today.”

“But...” Janna protested.

“No buts!” Tom replied with haste and annoyance that admitted no argument. “Janna, you just tried to draw energy from your own core self. You should never ever be doing that. If you had used your own life force to light the entire flame, you could have easily passed out, or worse. The whole point of the exercise is to draw magic from the outside, then guide it to do what you want, not force through with your own limited reserves. I told you, right at the beginning, it is extremely foolish for you to cast magic that way!”

“Isn’t that how you do it, though?! Or how Star does it?!” Janna replied, matching the demon’s
annoyance with her own. She was frustrated and tired of all this fruitless trying, and even more pissed off at the fact that they were going to stop now, after the first undeniable sign of progress. Even if the only thing she had been able to cast was the ‘Burning (My Own) Hands’ spell.

“Yes, and no,” Tom replied, pressing three fingers hard against his forehead. He was probably counting again, trying to regain his calm. Janna had learned to spot some of the demon’s anger management techniques. “I can call enough personal power to summon flames, among other things. It is just part of my nature as a demon, Janna. But there are plenty spells where I need to draw forces from... well, from elsewhere. Star channels most of her magic through her wand, and even I don’t know from where that thing, or her, really, draws power. In general, all spellcasting is some combination of your own magic and that which you can draw from the environment and, like I said, you don’t have a lot of the former, so you should master pulling from the later as much as possible...” he explained once more, speaking slowly, as if to a child, making visible effort to keep his tone level.

“And,” Janna asked, “even if I don’t have much magic of my own, if I do learn to draw magic from trees and corpses and worms, will I be able to cast spells like you... and Star?”

“No,” Tom responded bluntly. “Janna, how much magic you can control also depends on how much magic you naturally have and what sources you can reasonably access. You could spend your entire life practicing this sort of thing and you will never be able to call forth one tenth of the power Star could summon the second she got her magic wand. I never said you could. You are a regular human and she, well, she is something quite rare and quite extraordinary in this universe... I mean, Mewni royal magic is incredibly powerful, in general, and so is Star in particular. She is truly an amazing individual, so is not really a fair point of comparison for a normal human girl...”

“So, no matter what I do, I won’t ever be a tenth of what Star is then, Tom?” Janna asked, and somehow she knew the conversation was not about spellcasting anymore. It was extremely childish of her. She knew that as she spoke the words. But, the more time she spent with Tom, the more she resented the knowledge that the demon prince loved Star, and thought of herself just a temporary distraction while the princess was otherwise occupied

She could not fault Star, of course. Neither for her magic, nor for her effect on the demon boy. She could also not really fault Tom, at least not if she was trying to be fair. Being a distraction from Star was the deal she had originally offered him, so it was not reasonable to expect more now. But what had sounded like a great deal when she was only sort of attracted to the idea of Tom, somehow did not seem enough now that she was starting to fall for him, and for all the wrong reasons.

Tom looked away from her. Then, as if he had not understood, he spoke, “Well, the world isn’t fair. But confirmation that you can learn to cast magic at all was news to you last night. Isn’t it good news to know it is at least possible? Perhaps you should focus on that for now?” He seemed thoroughly irritated. Janna only felt even more angry at him in return. He was obviously missing, or avoiding, the point.

“Argh! Wack! Wack!” came a series of grunts and squawking noises from far beyond the boundaries of the dark sea. Toffee found the racket most annoying, but he endured it, as always. He was nothing if not patient. He could see through Ludo’s eyes, for as long as the Avarius child held the remains of his own arm and the half-star crystal. He could watch the... lesser... monster using the wand to stir the awful broth he had prepared for himself, and to bludgeon a giant bug. One half of the most powerful instrument in all of Mewni, and the foolish bird-brain was using it to cook
“She is here, you know?” Glossaryck spoke. “She just saw the wand.”

A dark smile formed within the oily black liquid as Toffee dared manifest his head and peek further towards the outside world, through Ludo’s eyes. Right now, he was mostly just a toothy lizard grin plastered on the crest of a slow rolling wave of corrupted magical essence, black as tar. In all directions, the sea of tainted magic flowed into a boundless expanse, the few remaining large icebergs of golden pure light quickly melting into the darkness. Atop it, the little blue man floated, while the monster lay below, merged with the malignant substance.

“Moon is here?” Toffee confirmed, spitting out the name with slow deliberate venom. Moon the Undaunted, who had scattered his armies and robbed him of his finger. Little did she know that she herself had shown him the way to defeat her, and her entire cursed family. “If she is here, then the timelines can’t have diverged that much yet. Perhaps history shall carry on as intended after all.”

“I’d be careful with what you wish for,” Glossaryck commented with a shrug. “But no, like I said, that future is long past.”

“Is it?” The lizard retorted, genuinely surprised. “The way I see it, we are almost back on schedule. Unless, I am missing something?”

Toffee had retreated into the depths of the wand to stop the outflow of magic, and so far it seemed to be working. While he remained hidden from the outside world, pulling and corrupting Star’s magic, and the rest of the power flowing through Mewni, he could feel himself winning the cosmic tug-of-war against whomever or whatever else was trying to redirect the magical power. It was only a matter of keeping his concentration here, rather than letting himself be distracted by talking to his unwitting servant or by his new found chances at corporeality.

“Mmmm, you know, Toffee, for someone who is literally submerged in magic, you seem to be only looking at the surface of things,” the magical being explained calmly. A look of resignation in his diamond eyes.

“The surface? I don’t stay at the surface of anything, little man,” the flowing lizard face spoke as it disappeared into the sea. Then the voice came from nowhere and from everywhere at once. “I can go as deep as I want, and I assure you, the magic is all here, and is all corrupted, right down to the bottom!”

“Yes,” Glossaryck conceded. “Yes it is.”

It was only after hearing that, that Toffee noted the bright emerald solid core at the bottom of his dark well of magic. A sickly glowing thing of unearthly beauty and incredible malevolence. The magic was there, and it was corrupted, but it was no longer his corruption, or his magic.

----

The silence had grown thick between them. They stared at each other, glaring daggers of annoyance and frustration. He felt the anger rising inside, embers burning within his chest and gut.

Not even Star was this stubborn! And it wasn’t just stubbornness. Frankly, Tom hadn’t had anyone be this unfair to him in quite a long time. Not since he stopped dating within his own kind, at least. He was being nothing but helpful, and this was what he got for his efforts? Yelled at for telling the girl the unfortunate truth about her own potential?

How could she be so damn unreasonable!
“Janna, damn it, I am trying to do you a favor here,” he finally spat. “I don’t need an attitude on top of it!”

“Doing me a favor?” Janna rolled her eyes. “You mean by teaching me magic? Or by going out with me?”

Tom contained the urge of yelling ‘both’ at her out of spite. He noticed that he wanted to hurt her, to let out his frustration on the troublemaker girl. He took a deep breath. What exactly was he frustrated about? What in particular was riling his temper, other than the blazing rage that always burned in him, just below the surface? Brian had taught him that sometimes just knowing what made him angry, in each particular occasion, could help him calm down.

“Of course I meant teaching you magic! I don’t need to do it. It will be hard for you to learn and I don’t have the patience to be a good teacher, Janna!” he retorted. And is not like she had the patience to be a good student either, he thought, but bit his tongue on that one.

That was it, though. He was frustrated because they had been practicing for hours and Janna had made no progress. He saw her own frustration and felt frustrated himself, frustrated at not being able to teach her better or have her make progress faster. He had been so eager to get Janna working some basic magic, to fulfill that desire of her, and also, if he had to be fully honest, to reap the praise and admiration she would bestow on him for helping her with that. Instead, now she was angry at him, despite all his efforts, rather than grateful for them, and it wounded him.

“It will be hard for me to learn,” she repeated, coldly. “Unlike Star, you mean?”

Oh, for fuck sake, that was it! Tom stopped even trying to calm himself. If the dark-haired girl wanted them to fight, then they would fight. “I wouldn’t have anything to teach Star about magic! Star was meant to do magic, from the moment she was born. You weren’t!”

“So, you would still rather be dating Star, then. Is that right?” Janna asked, a threatening undertone to her voice concealed a faint touch of doubt. She glared at him, and he glared back.

“Well, yes! Of course I would! But magic has nothing to do with it,” he shot back, without hesitation. But then he caught the hurt look in the human girl’s eyes.

It was brief, replaced in an instant by an even harsher scowl. Still, for a second, only for a second, it looked as if Janna was about to break down crying. Tom felt guilty about his admission. It was no lie, however, and she had been the one to push him into saying it, even when she should have known better. It is not that he didn’t like the human, but Star was precious to him, in a way that she couldn’t possibly understand. No one else had ever been that precious to Tom. Not even close.

“Too bad she prefers half of Marco to all of you, then,” Janna spit back. It was a low blow. Painful and biting to his ego and to his heart. She kept going, “Hell, she has spent the last two weeks telling me what a terrible idea hanging out with you is, and I am starting to see her point!”

Tom had no response to that. He felt his heart sink into his chest. He felt furious, and humiliated, but mostly, he felt sad and heartbroken. The human girl’s words rang true. Star did not want him anymore, and maybe now Janna didn’t either. He felt his body react to the pain and the sadness, turning it all into the emotion that was the most familiar to him: rage. His clawed fists clenched, flames danced around his knuckles. He was seeing red, literally.

“There again, who could blame her? I mean, let’s be honest, Tom, you got more issues than a weekly magazine!” the girl continued to shout viciously at him. At the same time, her face was turning red. A thin tear fell from her left eye.
“I have issues, Janna? I have issues?!” Tom growled. He felt the fire welling up inside his core. Something ancient and instinctual in him bade him to attack, to harm, to go for the kill. “You knew I liked Star, even before we met! You made this whole elaborate plan to get together with me. A plan that involved, I remind you, having me sleep with Star! A plan that you told me was going to get me Star. You started this whole ‘relationship’, if you can call it that, under false pretenses, and now you have the fucking nerve to spring this crap on me when I am doing my damn best to help you achieve your stupid wish of learning magic!? Janna, maybe you are right and I do have issues, but you are even more messed up than I am!”

She stared at him, silently. Her angry glare softening and avoiding his own. She looked down.

When she finally spoke, it was in a very quiet, distant, voice. “Yeah, well, Tom, of course I know that. I know I manipulated you, and I manipulated Star too. I know I am being selfish, and I know I have no right to ask you for more than you agreed to when we first spoke.”

She paused and took a deep trembling breath. “But Tom, that is the problem, you are already giving me more than what you agreed to originally. You helped me fix my home after I stole from you, and that same night, I mean, after... well... you know, it felt so right and comfortable, at least to me. And now you are taking your entire night to try and teach me to cast spells, even if I am not the best person to learn and you are not the best person to teach. You are already putting more effort into this than what you agreed to the night of the concert. The thing is, Tom, I have feelings for you, and all of this stuff we are doing is not helping me keep those feelings in check. So at which point do I get to ask if you also have any feelings for me? If I am something more than a ploy to make your ex jealous, or a replacement goldfish for Star?”

Tom felt his anger abate, slightly, as he heard the girl explain herself.

“Janna, you are not a replacement for Star, and I don’t think you could be,” the demon prince replied calmly. “But that does not mean I don’t have feelings for you. That night, in your house, after the whole thing with Midra’Apep and, well, what we did together in what was left of the house,” he smirked a single fanged smirk, “I don’t know how to explain it, but I have never felt that relaxed or that calm. There is a lot that is wrong with me. You are right on that. But, that night, I felt like, like I had let it out of me for a while, like opening a valve and venting out all the fire and all the darkness in me, without really harming anyone or doing anything I would hate myself for doing. At least, I thought I didn’t harm you back then. Maybe I was wrong...”

“No,” Janna replied, still looking down. “You didn’t hurt me. I enjoyed that night, Tom. I enjoy you using me, and yelling at me, and being mean. It is you being kind to me that I have trouble handling right now.” She seemed to stop to think for a few moments. Then, smiling weakly, she added, “Wow, aren’t we both a mess?”

“Heh. Yeah,” Tom smiled at her, walked toward her and lifted her face up, carefully cleaning the tears from it with the back of his clawed hand. “We are both pretty fucked up.”

----

“Whoa. So you’re, like, a totally tortured artist. Cool!”

Star felt she had seriously misjudged the songstrel after all. A few hours earlier, she had shouted him out of her bedroom, unable to follow through with getting one of those saccharine princess songs made about her, not even for Marco’s sake. And then, well, then he had hit her back in the last way she had ever expected. He had explained his intentions of writing a genuine song about a real princess. He had said that was his wish, that the people of Mewni deserved to know who their future queen truly was, that he didn’t want to write the same kind of princess song other songstrels
had before him. He noted that Star had misjudged him, jumped to conclusions because of what he
was, not bothering to try to learn who he was. Ouch.

He had left in a huff, and she had followed him back to Mewni, feeling somewhat guilty about not
even having given him a chance. Now that she saw him, burning through paper, still giving it his
best effort to end up with something other than a cheesy boring perfect princess song, she regretted
it even more.

“What do you want?!” He glowered at her, and the future queen felt pretty damn small, if only for
a second.

She had thought of him the whole day as one more songstrel in a long line of awful interchangeable
songstrels. Which, whoa, perspective, was exactly what the people who saw her just as another
perfect little princess did to her! Well, as if she didn’t feel bad enough already.

“You, uh, you forgot your stupid notebook,” was all she could think of replying. Incredibly lame,
she had to admit. She hadn’t planned what exactly she would tell him when she opened the portal
and bolted after him, and it did not help that this was the first time she was even considering Ruby
as a person, rather than as a symbol of a stuffy old tradition. Now that she was truly seeing him for
him, he seemed like a pretty interesting artsy guy. Looked kinda cute too. Like, not Marco-cute,
maybe not even Oskar-cute, but cute. Still, priorities, Star. “Ruberiot, do you really hate Princess
Songs as much as I do?”

“I do, Princess. I thought I could change them. I know they can be better. I can do better.” He
seemed hopeful for a second, before suddenly becoming crestfallen again. “But, the show is
tomorrow, and I have nothing!”

“Ruberiot, nothing is that bad when you have a magic wand!” Star smiled at him. “Like, I can
literally freeze time with this thing! Although, well, on second thought, maybe we better just like
extend it, or duplicate you, or do something less risky than the full clock-freeze, ok? Messing with
time can get kinda weird...” she rambled for a second there before she caught herself. “Actually,
first, you said you wanted to know the real me, right? So, what do you want to know?”

“Ah, sure, princess, well, lots of things, but let’s start simple: any unique hobbies?” he asked,
sounding uncertain. Like he didn’t yet buy Star’s sudden change in attitude towards his own
appointed task.

“Sure! I fight monsters! And tame wild unicorns!” Star replied, proudly.

“Whoa, that’s good, that’s really good. Bold. New. Unexpected. How about...” He put his fingers
to the keys and began improvising a tune as he sang, “And under the glimmer of bright shining
pearls, lies hidden a brave and adventurous girl!”

“Uh, we are going to have to do something to update your beats, Ruby,” Star groaned at the tune.
“But... I do like the lyrics.”

“Update? Oh, right, like, music from other dimensions. Bold, super bold. I like it. Say no more!”
Ruberiot exclaimed. Then started musing, almost to himself, “I am going to need instruments, and
stage work, then, maybe... animatronics? But, princess, we are getting sidetracked. Themes first,
notes second, lyrics third. So, what are you most proud of, Princess Star, of all you have done thus
far?”

“Uh,” Star looked sideways at her wand. “Oooh, I know.” She smiled a broad, dangerous, smile,
and aimed at a wall. “Nar-whal BLAST!”
A full horde of tiny horned whales emerged from her wand and blew up a hole in the tower’s brickwork. The outside wind sucked out the troves of draft paper. Bits of wall fell all over the place, one of them hit the piano, breaking all the keys on the left side.

“Oh, oh, sorry, sorry, I’ll fix that in one sec. But, isn’t that pretty neat, though?” the mewman girl asked, running a hand down the back of her own head.

“That’s, that’s… inspiring!” Ruberiot shouted excitedly. “Maybe something like, I dunno: ‘She is casting magic like a born spellcaster, crashing walls like a natural disaster!’ No, not walls, mmmhmm… well, we will work on that. But, the thing is, princess, if the song is going to be real, about the real you, it does also need to include more than your strengths, it needs to include your flaws, your struggles, your failures! Princess, I am sorry to have to ask, but art demands it! What would you say is your greatest regret?”

Star blinked. Her biggest regret? Well, if you had asked her a month ago it would have probably been, dunno, not asking Marco before Jackie did? No, actually, it would have been losing Glossaryck and her book of spells. That was the one time she felt she had failed at something important, it had cost her a precious family heirloom and, more importantly, her friend. Traitor or not.

Then again, as the princess went over the events of the last few weeks, she realized that was no longer her biggest regret. There was another, more hurtful, more personal, more intimate. A mistake she brought upon herself not by failing to do something, but by doing something she would, in retrospect, not have done. She remembered the cold stone floor, the sound of water running, the splinters, the heat. She remembered laying under Tom, imagining she was with Marco. She remembered how cold and insufficient it had felt, in her heart of hearts, if not on her flesh and blood. She remembered Tom’s furious and hurt look, as she yearned and cried out for Marco instead. She had hurt Tom that night, and hurt herself, and even though things turned out alright, that was one episode of her life she could have done without.

Ruberiot was staring at her, looking carefully, as if measuring her reaction.

“My biggest regret is the time I let my best friend be kidnapped,” Star said, not wanting to dwell any more on the other thing. She spoke rapidly, forcing a nervous smile. Then, realizing that it was supposed to be a sad tale, she tried switching it to a frown half-way through, and ended in a sort of bizarre grimacing rictus. “He was held in a dark dirty monster castle, and could have gotten hurt. But I managed to save him, and…”

“Princess,” the songstrel interrupted her, quietly. “I would much rather you told me of the first thing you thought about. The one you switched out for something safer and less embarrassing. The one that’s real.”

Damn! Ruby was apparently a lot more perceptive than he looked like. Ugh.

“That was real! Marco really was captured by Toffee,” Star protested.

“Princess, I am not accusing you of lying. I am sure all you said did happen,” Ruberiot explained. “What you told me is true, but it isn’t real. A song doesn’t need to be truthful, it needs to be real.”

“Well, Ruberiot, it is a long story, and it’s personal. I don’t want to put it in a song that the entire kingdom will hear…” she fretted. Sure, she wanted her subjects to know the real her, but did they really need to know that?

“Then we won’t put the story. We will use metaphor. We will use analogy. We don’t need the
story. We only need the feeling. True art is saying something real, not necessarily something literal. But, Star, I am going to need to know. Otherwise, how can I understand the feeling well enough to weave it into the song?” Ruberiot pleaded.

“What if I am not sure I want that part weaved into the song?”

“Then I guess you don’t really want it to be a song about the real you, princess”

Star sighed. Well, she could probably trust Ruberiot’s judgment on this. He seemed like a nice enough guy, and he really did get her. Besides, it was what she wanted: a song about a real princess, with all her gifts and flaws. As long as it was only alluded to indirectly. “Ok, Ruby, I guess I have to tell you about my ex…”

----

“So, what you are saying is…” Tom begun asking, slowly. He paused, unsure of how to continue paraphrasing her offer. Janna’s lip curved into a smug smile, feeling surprisingly satisfied at causing the demon so much hesitation. She loved teasing him with the brazenness of her words, as much as she enjoyed being teased by the boldness of his actions.

“I am saying that I want more of what we did that time in my house, only this time it won’t be ‘punishment’. It won’t need to be this controlled, carefully dosed out sort of performance you put for my benefit. Not saying that I don’t want that in the future, far from it. But, tonight, it will simply be you venting, Tom, letting the anger out, at me, at Star, at whatever you want,” the human girl reiterated. “How does that sound?”

She let her arms fall to her sides, standing in front of the demon prince, presenting him a purposefully exposed and vulnerable position. She tilted her head ever so slightly, literally sticking out her neck to him, like prey tempting predator. She gave him her best inviting sexy smile, and she did not have to act to show him the excitement in her eyes. Janna wanted Tom to do things to her, the kind of things that came from the darkness and fire he said lived within himself.

People thought of the demon as having a short fuse and being quick to let his anger out. But, if she was right, then Tom was actually a master of self-control, bottling up things inside of him that humans, or mewmans for that matter, simply did not have to deal with, just because of what he was.

“Sounds…” Tom shifted around uncomfortably, “…intriguing. I mean, it is a great offer and all, but, Janna, are you doing this to get me to like you instead of Star? If so, I am flattered, but you don’t need to…”

It wasn’t like that! Well, alright, maybe it was partly like that. But that wasn’t her main reason. “Mostly, I am asking because I want to see. I want to see you let loose. Scratch that. I want to feel you let loose. For my benefit as well as yours. Come on, Tom, wouldn’t it feel good to let go, for once?”

“Yes, oh yes, you have no idea how tempting that is, Janna,” Tom replied, in a carefully subdued tone, which barely restrained the arousal in his voice. He shook his head. “But, what if I go overboard? No offense, but you are more fragile than… Anyways, I really don’t want to end up causing you actual harm.”

“Then don’t, Tom,” Janna shrugged. “I mean, I am not asking you to throw fireballs at me, or crush my bones to dust, or anything like that. Just, be mean the way you want to be mean, rather than the way you think I want you to be mean to me. Just this once. If I can’t handle it, or think you are
close to hurting me in any permanent way, I’ll yell, I don’t know... avocado!”

“Avocado?” Tom raised an eyebrow, or two.

“Yeah, avocado!” Janna chuckled. “It is called a safe-word, Tom. If I beg for mercy or plead with you, from this point on, then I will be doing it to turn you on,” the girl winked and the demon blushed, slightly. “If I say avocado, though, then I do mean for you to stop, right then and there. As long as I don’t say that, you will know I am having a good time. Does that work?”

Janna had been doing some reading online, ever since their previous time together. Having a way to stop their games made sense. It made them safer to play. Tom seemed like a decent enough, well, demon, that he would acknowledge the word if and when she needed to use it, even if he was still having a good time. At least, that’s what Janna hoped. Still, in the back of her mind, a voice was telling her that she was doing something incredibly dangerous, asking Tom to release control of his anger on her, asking him to loosen control on purpose. That voice, annoyingly enough, sounded to the human girl like a certain Star Butterfly.

“Ok, we can do that, if you are sure that’s what you want?” Tom answered hesitantly. When Janna nodded in agreement, his face quickly changed. He smirked a smug and knowing smirk, suddenly switching into the living image of self-assuredness. He walked towards her and slowly ran a clawed finger through her jaw. “So now I can make you pay for all that crap you said before, and for the time wasted on useless magic lessons...”

Hearing those words, Janna frowned. Then, thinking it through a bit more carefully, she purposefully laughed to his face. That ought to work better to stop him in his tracks, without having to start screaming produce, she reasoned. The demon prince looked back with a confused stare.

“Didn’t I say not to do what you think I want you to do?” she asked. “Come on, Tom, I may not know you as well as Star does, but I do know when you are faking it.”

She considered for a while on what the best course of action would be. Then, a thought occurred to her, a dangerous and nasty thought. She looked up at Tom, closed her mouth, gathered saliva with one quick take and, without warning, spat on his face. Tom’s eyes glowed red, fire surged around him, and in one rapid movement he slapped her face with the back of his hand. It felt deliciously raw and brutal. So intense. So real. “Yeah, now, that’s what I am talking about, Tommy boy!”

“What?!” Tom shouted. “You can’t be serious... you want me to just hit you?”

“Not ‘just’ hit me, Tom, but it is a start,” Janna quipped, as she slowly lifted her banged head back up.

“Oh, fine, then see how you like this, you crazy bitch!” He grinned, slowly getting into the spirit of things. He raised his hand again, and slapped her opposite cheek. Her skin burned, both from the force of the impact and from the intense heat pooled into his still partly scorching palm.

“Aww, Tom, such a charmer, you are going to make a girl blush,” Janna retorted once her teeth stopped shaking and her jaw felt like moving again. She wondered how long she would be able to keep goading him on.

Tom jumped towards her, moving forward through the air as if propelled by some unseen force. Closing his firm iron hands around both her wrists, he pinned her against the tree. Now she really felt the tree for sure, no magic-sense required: she felt every inch of hard rough bark against her thin summer clothing. The fabric of her shirt and tights tangled against the rind’s groves and
protrusions. “Oh, Janna, I am going to do a lot more to you than make you blush.”

“Hey, I thought we were doing what you wanted, not what I want?” the human girl replied, only half seriously.

“Oh, don’t worry, we are!” Tom’s eyes went red again as he grabbed a fistful of her dark hair, and pulled down, forcing the troublemaker on her knees. With his other hand, he undid the front of his pants and pulled his dick out through the open buttons of his black boxer-shorts. “I trust that you get the idea?”

Janna smiled and leaned forward, running her tongue along the length of the demon’s rapidly hardening cock. “Tom, tell me, how do you feel about Star?” she asked. Without waiting for an answer, he took the demon’s twitching member into her mouth and began moving up and down on it.

“What? About Star? Are you asking now? Why?” Tom retorted surprised. “Fine. I love Star, I admire her inner strength and her energy, and the fact that she does what she wants. But also, these days I mostly feel frustrated with her, frustrated that she keeps turning her back on me, ignoring what we had... ugh, are you really going to have me talking about Star while you do that? Right now, fuck Star!”

That was what the girl wanted to hear, and she picked up the pace and pursed her lips tighter in encouragement. She tried to take him deeper, like last time, back at her place. She found she could not do so without help, her mind was willing, but her throat muscles were utterly uncooperative in opening up. Instead, she tried running her hand around the demon’s buttocks and legs. Eventually settling on massaging his unnaturally warm balls through his underwear.

“Fuck Star! Fuck Marco! Fuck your questions! And. Fuck. You!” Tom shouted. He reached down and pulled at Janna’s t-shirt, ripping it open with ease. She felt the cold night air against her breasts immediately, followed by the painfully hot touch of the demon’s hands and claws. He began pulling and twisting her nipples, while at the same time pushing against her face with his hips, quite literally fucking her mouth. She felt it slide easily down her throat now, after his hands made her scream from the pain and he began thrusting hard through her lips. It was a painful, almost suffocating sensation, yet also exhilarating. She felt used. She felt sore. She felt like she was about to puke. She felt like she was about to form a puddle through her pants just from how wet this was making her.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it stopped. Tom pulled back. Janna opened her mouth to protest, to beg, to demand that he returned to banging her face. A slap on her left cheek shut her up before she could even say a word.

“On your feet!” Tom shouted. Janna hesitated and she immediately felt him brutally pull her up by her hair. A clawed hand reached down and carelessly ripped a hole in her tights, right over her melting crotch. The demon prince slammed into her without so much as a warning, and Janna was surprised to discover that she was so aroused that it glided in effortlessly, despite Tom’s impatient forcefulness.

Tom fucked her against the tree, her back scratching up and down the rough bark. He held her up by the hair with one of his hands, while the other dug claw marks into the side of the trunk. She rested her own arms on Tom’s shoulders, and parted her legs as much as she could without falling. Tom’s motions were fierce but regular, as he quickly picked up pace in his thrusting. She felt him hitting all the right spots inside of her, delving deeper, perhaps, than he had ever before. But what really did it for her were his almost animalistic grunts and his forceful hunger. The demon prince seemed and sounded feral, savage. He was out of his mind and it drove her out of hers.
Janna closed her eyes. The whole world dissolved into sensations too intense to describe in words. The racking bark behind her, the burning hot pulsating rod going in and out of her, her own flesh opening and closing around it, the pain from her hair being violently pulled up, the pleasure building inside her. But most of all, she felt Tom. He was wordless now, breath irregular, grunting through his gritted fangs, pupil-less red eyes glaring at her. He seemed lost in a trance of anger and pleasure. And she was in a trance of her own.

Suddenly she realized she could truly feel Tom. She did not mean just Tom’s cock inside her, or his skin against hers, but the fire deep within his being as well, burning with anger, frustration, lust, and magic. What had been an enormous ghostly shadow in the corner of her eye before, was now clear to her, down to its finest contours. She pulled at the fire inside her lover with hungry abandon. Letting go of Tom’s shoulders, she let both arms fall against her sides. In front of each of her hands, a sphere of purple flame the size of a fist sprouted instantly out of thin air.

Tom grunted and tensed, and then he exploded inside her, emptying himself into her. As he did so, the two fireballs flew forward from her palms. They hit two separate tombstones, turning them instantly into dust, leaving the area around black with soot. The exploding spheres seared the grass and blew up clouds of dust and ash with a thunderous roar.

Tom blinked, surprised. His eyes returned to normal as his orgasmic bliss faded. He looked back at the damage, dumbfounded, “Shit, Janna! I think you just drew some major magic from me!”

“Yeah... and also some fireballs too,” Janna said with a chuckle, and let herself slowly fall to the floor besides the tree. Tom groaned.

----

The mountain surrounding the ancient temple was unnaturally quiet, without the call of a single bird or the buzzing of a single bug. Toffee stood there, in Ludo’s stolen body, floating in mid air, fully in control, wand at the ready. He had felt it approach, whatever it was. One of the advantages of being connected to the entire stream of corrupted magic was that he could sense when so much of it was nearby in the outside world. He was sure Glossaryck could sense it too, although he did not know how exactly the diminutive magical being did it.

Over the last few hours, the immortal monster had seen his dark ocean reduced to a shallow pool over the frozen emerald crystal permafrost. Now only a few feet of the oily black substance remained, pierced everywhere by towering spikes of viridescent glass which sprouted from the ever growing solid core. Whatever was the force that opposed him, it had done in a day what had took months for him to pull off.

Toffee was angry, but more than anything, he was determined. Now it came for him, it sought him out. He would fight it, whatever it was, and he would win. He was the one who made the plans. He was in control. This... this meddler, would pay!

A diffuse fluttering sound, as if millions of gossamer wings flapping in the air, reverberated softly around them. Sparks of green light shone all around in the night sky, like ghostly fireflies. Quickly they all began converging in front of the monster, slowly assembling into a tall slender humanoid shape of bright green light. Soon it became clear that the resplendent figure was female, but none of its features could be seen through the brightness. In place of a face, a beautifully ornate but expressionless silver mask shimmered into existence. It had blank emotionless holes for eyes and a solid metal lip permanently curved into a slight smirk. The various reliefs on the false face were rendered unreadable by the intense backlight, which shone blindingly through the edges and eye sockets of the strange mask.
“This, you see, well, this, is... quite bad,” Glossaryck deadpanned, looking up at the apparition.

“Oh, it is,” Toffee agreed. “For her.”

Guiding Ludo’s hand, he aimed the wand straight against the intruder, hitting it squarely in the masked face with a formidable green and black blast of corrupted magic. A nasty smile crossed the lizard face as he anticipated his victory. It quickly vanished. As soon as the spell connected, he felt a jolt of electricity go up through his body, his real body in the handle and the inside of the wand. An instant later, he was half-deafened by a booming metallic sound, like the tolling of a humongous bell. As he reeled back in pain and the magic beam faded away, the womanly figure calmly advanced towards him, gracefully gliding through the air.

“What, what are you...?” Toffee asked in surprise, pain, and terror.

“I am will, unbending,” the form of light replied.

It raised a hand and a beam of unearthly green flame sprung forth from it, it hit Toffee, and the wand, and the book of spells. The lizard in bird clothing fell backwards, towards the temple, charred and consumed. His back hit a huge pillar of stone, which cracked under the magical energies still surrounding his body and fell upon him, entombing Toffee beneath its huge weight. The crystal in the wand turned black as void and disintegrated into a million pieces. Meanwhile, the book slowly burned to ashes.

“Well, what do you know?” Glossaryck pondered, in calm resignation, as he ignited too, burning up as one with the book’s pages. “The more things change, the more they stay the same...”

Chapter End Notes

Believe it or not, not much was changed in the Toffee scenes from the outline after I saw Battle for Mewni.

* His first scene in this chapter was always going to be inside the wand. At the time I imagined it as an empty black void of some sort. But now that the show has given us the "ocean of goop" visual, it just felt right to use that instead.

* He and old Glossy were going to die at the end of this Chapter either way. Of course, the details of their deaths were changed last minute for added irony. An important difference, besides it all happening much earlier in the timeline, is that Ludo has now died in the fic, while he lives in the show.

Also, yes, I know, I know: Star's and Marco's magic link gets stronger whenever any of the two are fucking, and Janna literally gains magical powers from sex. What can I say, that's how this world works now. It is "My Little Porno, Sex Equals Magic". Promise the story will have stakes that don't get solved with a bang, though. ;)

Speaking of which...

**Next, in "I Summon the All-seeing Eye":** And now, Mewni’s newest court composer, the songstrel, Ruberiot...
When this Shooting Star Ignites

Chapter Summary

In which we observe yet more things our protagonists are unaware of, Marco spends $650, Jackie deals with a case of crown-envy, and Star’s secrets are revealed in song form.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 12: When this Shooting Star Ignites

**Continuity stardate:** Chapters 10 to 12 take place during the span of SvtFoE episode “Face the Music” (S02E21), but the timeline has diverged enough that some important scenes will play out very differently from canon. Previous episodes are in continuity for this fic, episodes after S02E21, generally speaking, are not.

“Are you sure you know where we are going?” her companion asked.

“Shhhh!!” she shushed the other princess. She was *so* not lowering herself to even dignify that question with a response. Of course she knew where they were going! Whether or not she was sure of how to get there, *exactly*, was not the point!

Her own admonition, admittedly, came off way louder than the tiny pixie’s voice. Not that anyone cared, though, because this particular hallway was as deserted as a party half-an-hour after she left.

Anyways, it wasn’t like her to sneak around!

Oh, who was she kidding? It was totally like her to sneak around! She was *baaad* like that!

But that didn’t mean she had to do it quiet-like, though. Not her style. Too cool for that shtick. Plus, no one had actually bothered being in this part of the manor in a very long time, not since the old owner was, *ahem*, forced to tend her resignation.

Little did they suspect, back then, all the ways in which the new management would turn out to be even worse. But, hey, at least she knew just the person to help them out of that particular bind. The problem was getting the message out to her!

She was the one who saw the door first, obviously! The ugly thing somehow managed to be, at once, the most ornate, and the most depressingly square door in the whole mansion. That was square as in *boring*, by the way, not just the shape. Well, at least it meant they hadn’t gotten lost!

*Of course* they hadn’t gotten lost! She was awesome like that.

Her pixie friend - or, well, like, much less cool acquaintance, really - pulled a pin out of her belt, as if unsheathing a sword. She proceeded to quickly apply herself to picking the tumblers on the lock with it. Thank god she was quick with it! She saved her the effort of just ramming the damn door with her horn, after all. Which was a thing she totally could do, because she was awesome like that!
They both walked, or, well, flew, into the former headmistress’ bedchamber. The room was old and dusty, and it showed no signs of anyone having lived there in months. She felt somewhat nervous to go inside, even now, not that she would ever ever admit that. They all had bad memories of when this room was inhabited, back when the school was still a school. Well, more like a jail, really. Like, even more jail-like than your average school!

They moved quickly, opening drawers, unlocking chests, taking perverse pleasure in untidying the damably stiff room. Until she finally found what they really needed.

“Ohhh scoreee, Giiirl! Look what I just found!!” she shouted, not caring in the least if anyone heard.

Even if someone did hear, they would be far too late to stop her now. Inside the cabinet was a small basket, and inside the basket a dozen or so pairs of scissors. And not just any scissors. Those were all dimensional scissors, confiscated to all of the former students of Saint Olga’s Reform School for Wayward Princesses, by old hag Miss Heinous herself. Those were their ticket out of there.

“Now we can go fetch my home girl... and when we do, I swear White won’t know what hit her!” she boasted to her diminutive hanger-on, who smiled in relief and, she expected, heartfelt admiration and gratitude.

As she picked up a pair of scissors with her tongue, Pony Head let out a loud whine, which soon morphed into a bout of maniacal laughter. Thunder and lightning, both common features of St. O’s magical weather, echoed her cackle from outside the castle’s windows.

----

“Get your exclusive Star Butterfly merch here!” a vendor shouted as their carriage passed by its cart. Jackie looked out of the window, aware that she was probably gawking around like an inexperienced tourist. She couldn’t help it. Try as she might to keep her usual cool, there was nothing usual about her first visit to Mewni. The entire place looked like it came from a cross between her history books, a fairy tale animated picture, and literal Disneyland. Especially what with all the food stands and glowing Star Butterfly branded products.

“Yo, Manfred, could you please get us some of that sweet swag?” Marco asked, leaning out through the window and passing their driver a large handful of dollar bills. Six hundred and fifty dollars, apparently. He had counted them right before.

“Certainly, young master,” the servant replied.

Marco thanked the man, and soon they found themselves surrounded by Star-themed trinkets. Jackie was holding a wooden replica of Star’s wand with a glowing star in the middle, while Marco held on to a similarly adorned wooden sword. He was also wearing a horned diadem on top of his hair, which contrasted with his otherwise impeccably prince-like attire.

It was really surprising how handsome the boy looked in that whole getup. He was even wearing shoulder pads and a cape, atop a regal looking white vest. Star’s blue and white dress was even more ornate, and she was wearing an actual gold crown atop her massive updo. Compared to the both of them, Jackie, even in her best sea-green formal dress, felt way underdressed.

“Marco, you know this is all for kids, right?” Star groaned, as Marco brandished the wooden toy around, badly. The princess seemed used to the commotion around them but, at the same time, bothered by it in a resigned sort of way. She sat in the long cushioned seat facing backwards from
the front of the carriage, clearly uninterested in the view of Mewni’s castle, which the opposite seat offered the two humans. Jackie wouldn’t miss that majestic sight for the world, but she figured that, to Star, it was just home. “This whole thing is going to be so boring, and so pointless…” the Mewman griped.

“But Star,” Marco smiled at the other girl, giving her a fake pleading look. “How can we cheer on for your Princess Song, if we are not waving around the merchandise!” he joked, getting a broad smile out of the magical princess despite her sulky mood. Jackie laughed approvingly. Oh Marco, he was such a cute idiot sometimes!

“Marco, you are not going to be wearing those,” Star took off his horns. “Or waving any of this stuff out there. As part of the royal entourage, you are supposed to wave politely, smile measuredly, and be proper and regal. Honestly, it really really sucks. Sorry to drag you guys to this!”

“Come on Star, this is pretty cool! I mean, I feel like I am hanging out with a celebrity,” Jackie said, making it sound like a joke. In reality, it was a bit intimidating. Mostly because it was true: she was hanging out with a famous celebrity. No, more than a celebrity. These people weren’t Star’s fans, they were her subjects.

Even if the princess didn’t make a big deal of it, and even if Jackie never gave it that much thought when they were on Earth, it was pretty clear that Star came from a very different social class than the two humans did. And, well, of course, that didn’t matter: she was her friend, and Marco’s other sweetheart, first, magical princess second. But the human girl would be lying if she said that, now that she found herself confronted with the reality of Star truly being a magical princess, with a kingdom of her own, she didn’t find it at least a bit intimidating.

“Yeah, Star, besides, weren’t you saying you and Ruberiot changed a lot of stuff on that song?” Marco asked, and the princess’ eyes lit up. “Can’t be boring if you helped write it!”

“Oh, yeah, can’t wait for you guys to hear it!” She beamed. “It’s going to be so much better than my mom’s old song! Just hope she doesn’t have a heart attack from it... I mean, I don’t think even her can get an actual heart attack from a song, but...” she trailed off and laughed nervously.

Taking full advantage of the lull in the conversation, Jackie pulled Marco closer to her side of the couch. She wrapped her arm around his shoulders and turned to kiss him. Their lips met and they melted into each other briefly. It was a reassurance thing, again. Just making sure Marco still thought both of his girlfriends were cool enough. She felt a bit guilty about it but, fortunately, Star’s reaction was nothing like that at the concert.

“Awwww, you two!” the mewman grinned. “Better get the smooches out while you can, though. I think it might be better if we all keep it friends-like in front of my mom...”

Star had mentioned that, if they needed to introduce anyone as a couple today, it would be Jackie and Marco, just as it was in school. But she had also asked if they could all just act like friends. She seemed nervous about showing any part of their complicated relationship around her people, and specially around her mother, the queen. Jackie could understand that. What if some day Star had to introduce Marco as her boyfriend? She would have a lot to explain if they previously introduced him as Jackie’s, particularly if she was still in the picture. Jackie’s own mom might not mind that explanation in principle, and even that felt like it would be an awkward conversation, but Star’s parents were likely a far bit more conservative than that. They sort of were medieval royalty, after all. Given that Star was doing her a really big favor simply by inviting her to the Song Day celebration at all, Jackie felt that following her request not to flaunt their relationship with Marco was the least she could do. That didn’t mean, however, that Marco and her didn’t get to be
boyfriend and girlfriend behind the privacy of the carriage doors and curtains.

“Oh, right,” Marco quipped at Star as soon as Jackie let go of his lips. Then, in his best imitation of Queen Moon’s voice, he continued, “Star, public displays of affection aren’t a Butterfly virtue.”

Star rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well, not-a-Butterfly-virtue this!” she shouted and jumped from her side right on top of Marco’s lap, straddling him. One of her legs falling atop Jackie’s own.

“Star, that sentence made no sen... ooh,” Marco began to complain, but Star shut up their boyfriend with a deep kiss.

Jackie laughed. Princess or no princess, magical kingdom or no magical kingdom, it was hard to see Star as anything other than the happy-go-lucky friend she knew. Feeling appropriately reassured, Jackie was left only to ponder how comfortable the three of them had grown with one another in such a short span of time.

----

“With all due respect, Moon, we need to talk now!” Hekapoo asserted herself, angrily stomping her foot on the ground.

“Hekapoo, I told you, we will reconvene after the celebration, it is starting as we speak...” Moon replied impatiently, as she tried frantically to adjust her hair.

“Omnitraxus is gone!” the sorceress argued. “We can’t get ahold of Glossaryck either, turns out nobody has seen him in months. I assume he is with your daughter, in which case she must bring him here immediately!”

“Omnitraxus, gone?” Moon replied, pausing for a moment, sounding genuinely surprised. “Are you sure of this?”

“Sure as can be, my queen,” Romulus interrupted. “Thought glass ball might be on the frizz. Went to find him in person. Not in time dimension! Not anywhere!”

“We need Glossaryck,” Hekapoo continued exasperated. “He and Omnitraxus are the only two who can find someone instantly across dimensions, and since Omnitraxus is the one who is missing...”

“Alright, alright,” Moon raised a hand. “Hekapoo, there is some stuff I need to tell you, and you are not going to like it. I promise to explain it all, but only after Star’s song is done. We have this under control, an hour is not going to kill anyone, alright?”

“But, Queen Moon...” she began, angrily, but was swiftly cut off.

“Hekapoo, I have my duties to my kingdom and my responsibilities as a mother. One hour. One song. After that, I promise you I’ll make this whole high commission business my first priority,” she looked at the short sorceress directly in the eyes, then placed a hand firmly on her shoulder. “Trust me, Hekapoo: I. Will. Do. My. Job.”

The Forger of Dimensional Scissors held the gaze briefly, then she smiled, nodded, and gave her queen a deep bow, “Of course, your majesty.”

Hekapoo was not easily appeased, but she had learned to trust the word of Moon the Undaunted, specially when she used that tone. Without further argument, they all walked out together into the castle’s balcony, leaving only the empty crystal ball behind, as to not alarm the other guests with
the dark empty formless void it now displayed.

---

“And now, Mewni’s newest court composer, the songstrel, Ruberiot...” shouted the announcer. The crowds below clapped loudly. “In honor of the royal family...” The spotlight went up, shining on Queen Moon, and King River, and Star, and, well, on him.

Marco nervously shuffled himself out of the bright radius, almost crashing into Jackie, who sat to the right of the whole row, and begun clapping towards Star. The princess of Mewni simply waved around, like it was nothing, while the two human teenagers exchanged an uncomfortable look. Clearly, this was way too much exposure, for either of them. Although, Jackie, as usual, seemed to be handling it better.

Besides a general discomfort about being the center of attention at this scale, Marco also wasn’t sure he wanted to create any implications that he was part of any royal family. Dating Star was one thing, and it was amazing. But, well, he guessed neither of them were thinking at all about the future... not in that way.

Hell, for all he knew, Star might be just thinking about him as a fling of her teenage years, before she actually set to look for the kind of guy that would be able to handle her life as Queen of Mewni. That seemed pretty likely, now that he thought of it, specially given their unconventional relationship. When the Earth boy thought of that, he wasn’t sure whether he felt sad, or relieved. It was clear that the crown weighted pretty heavy on Star, and she was like ten times stronger than he was, metaphorically just as well as literally. If she could barely handle that life, then what hope did he have?

Such grim and rather premature reflections were interrupted by the sound of slow chords on a lute, amplified by god knows which magic to the point to which the notes actually reached all the way to their balcony, together with the songstrel’s words. A ridiculously happy marionette of Star, with literal hearts for eyes, glided into the stage as Ruberiot began singing. The puppet dramatically mimicked along with the lyrics.

**Who is the maid with the buttercup hair?**
**Who sleeps on moonbeams and dances on air**
**With tears made of honey and a heart full of bunnies**
**Whose infinite virtues are known near and far**
**It’s Mewni’s own sweetheart, our dear Princess Staaar**

Even Marco felt weird hearing his best friend described that way. Sure, that was Star, kinda. She was indeed a happy joyful girl that could, sometimes literally, dance on air. But there was also so much more to her than that! He glanced at her, to gauge her own reaction, and saw her cringe and grimace. A second later, though, she turned to him and Jackie and sent them a brief wink.

Marco wondered what kind of changes Star could have made to the song. She had refused to tell him much about the plans she had made with the annoying musician the other night, except to say that they had reached an agreement, and that it would be nothing like her mom’s princess song. Marco was a bit worried, considering how Star sometimes got carried away with expressing herself, and how important this event seemed to be for her and her family. But on the other hand, deep down she knew all that much better than he did, and he trusted Star. Besides, if worse came to worst, surely the songstrel would make sure the show went well. The other day he had seemed, well, terrified of not being able to do his job properly, which meant he would probably make sure to strike a balance between pleasing Star and Queen Moon, right?
And under the shimmer and rubies and pearls
Lies hidden a fierce and adventurous girl
The forces of evil that lurk in the night
Will cower in fear when this shooting Star...
...ignites!

Marco was thinking to himself how those verses fit Star so much better than the previous ones, when Ruberiot jumped forward and literally smashed his lute against the floor. The bold gesture drew oh’s of surprise from the crowd, including Marco and Jackie. In the confusion, the musician seemed to pull a guitar out of thin air, and the stage exploded into a light show and a really sweet rock beat.

“Whoohoo!” Marco yelled, and he wasn’t the only one.

Queen Moon looked a bit surprised, but not angry. This was just perfect, this was Star!

----

Weaving magic like a born spell-caster
And wreaking havoc like a natural disaster
She rocks her Narwhal Blast and Warioicore Stampede
She’s gonna earn her crown, so hail to the quee-e-e-een!

Wow, now that was cool! Jackie had to admit she was impressed. Not just by the song or the elaborate visuals, but by Star herself. She might not know the mewman girl as well as Marco did, but she knew the song was all true. Star was not only royalty, she was some sort of magical fantasy warrior-girl! Again, Star was cool and popular back in Echo Creek too, but it was easy to forget there just how incredible the girl truly was, just her intrinsically, without putting an ounce of effort into it. Like, how on Earth was that Jackie still held on to her cool girl title when she had someone like Star around? She herself didn’t understand how that was possible.

‘No, come on Jackie, be chill, you are not competing with Star’ she mentally reminded herself. Her eyes drifted towards the girl, and she saw how the princess carelessly danced punching the air. She looked then at Marco, who stared intently at the stage below and cheered. Ugh, she felt a sickly gluey sensation in her stomach, like if she had eaten something bad. Jackie wasn’t happy with how she felt about this now. It wasn’t like she had anything against Star, or against her being royalty or famous, and she didn’t worry about her and Marco. Jealousy wasn’t her thing, right? She was happy when her boyfriend was with someone cool, it made her cool by transitivity, did it not? Then what exactly was this feeling eating at her now? Why wasn’t she happy for Star like everyone else was? Like she should be?

’Cause she’s a rebel princess, she’s the best
She’s a ball of lightning in a hot pink dress
She’s a thunderstorm roaring through the night
She’s our shooting Star, and she’s lighting up the sky!

Yeah... yes she was, and Jackie was, well, what was she? A moderately popular high school girl in a small town in California? How had she managed to get to Marco first? And what had made her think it was a good idea to open her relationship to Star? I mean, Marco might like them both equally now, or so he said, but one day he would figure out how much cooler Star was than her, and then what? Maybe this whole thing was a mistake, and she should have kept her big mouth shut. Even if the three of them were pretty happy together for now, how could she be sure it would last that way?
Jackie took a deep breath. Wow, Star was right, this jealousy and self-doubt stuff was way heavy. She reminded herself of the advice she had given the other girl when the roles were reversed and it was the princess that, for some unknown reason, had felt jealous of her. ‘Well, Lynn Thomas,’ she silently chided herself, ‘don’t talk the talk if you can’t walk the walk…’ She would learn to feel happy about Marco having someone like Star too, and deal with her own doubts on the matter. It just maybe was a little bit harder than she had anticipated, specially after witnessing something like this.

----

The princess looked at her friends and family, and was pleased to see happy faces all around. She loved her song, and they loved it too! Even her mom seemed pleased.

“What a delightful little ditty. Good job, Star!” the queen declared appreciatively.

“Uh, right. It’s not over yet,” Star replied, a bit apprehensively.

It really wasn’t, and even she didn’t know what to expect. Ruberiot had asked her for help with all of the bits so far, particularly with the stage work for that last part. He had needed some serious Butterfly Light and Magic to get those Narwhals and Warnicorns ready in time. However, for the third act, he had shooed her away. Something about true art needing solitude.

She only knew one thing about the third act: that it would be a darker contrast compared to the previous two segments. That’s why she didn’t feel too worried when she heard the slower mournful chords coming from the songstrel’s guitar, or saw bright red light overflowing the stage from behind the musician’s frame.

*Of royal secrets - sadly I must tell,*
*of our princess under a tragic love spell…*

She blushed a little. Well, Ruberiot had said this was necessary, for it to be real, and that he would keep things hidden and metaphorical. She was sure she could take this, in the name of the people of Mewni truly getting to know something about the real her. She just hoped her mom would not be too shocked at the result.

After all, Moon already knew about her dating Tom before being sent to Earth. That was all she really expected to hear put into her song. She had once dated a demon, big freaking deal!

*And who is the boy in the earthly attire?*
*Attached once already to the one he admires*
*Our princess with longing, watching from afar,*
*the prince who unwittingly stole her young heart!*

Wait, *What*!?! What was a puppet of Marco doing there? And a puppet of Jackie? And, they were dancing, waltzing around on literally tangling strings. Around the third line, puppet-Star had glided back into stage too. She glanced at them from the ground, then fell on her knees, clutching her heart.

It hadn’t been like that at all! Star told herself, unconvincingly. Ok, alright, it had been a little bit like that. But why was *this* in her Princess Song!?

This wasn’t what she and Ruberiot had talked about! It was supposed to be about Tom, about her previous relationship with him, with a demon, as kids. That was scandal enough! She had barely told Ruby anything about Marco, let alone about him and Jackie. Star glanced at Moon, who had
one eyebrow up in a regal gesture of surprise and mild confusion. Besides her, River was glaring daggers her way. Wait, no, he was glaring daggers at Marco!

The princess turned towards the two human kids, and saw that they had the same awkward confused expression on their faces as she did. “Sorry-Ruberiot-never-told-me-about-this-part!” she apologized.

Down in the streets the people were silent, and the tune picked up into powerfully deep and somber tones. The puppets representing Marco and Jackie left the stage floating upwards, while Star’s marionete replica remained kneeling on the floor. A dense cloud of ominous smoke, tinted red by the light, rose from the ground, covering the sobbing doll and obscuring the arena. Ruberiot advanced slowly to the edge of the platform, only partly emerging from the red fog. After a pause that seemed to go for just a heartbeat too long, he resumed singing in a low foreboding pitch.

*Falling star heartbroken by her love unwise,*
*She hides her aching chest and her teary yearning eyes,*
*Talking to an ex-lover, in old flame defrosts,*
*Wants to be with someone, no matter what the costs!*

A powerful light turned on behind Ruberiot, right on cue. It projected the shadow silhouette of Star’s puppet, still kneeling on the floor. Then, a second shadow rose beside the first. A tall walking shape with two small horns upon its head. The two shapes were framed by the illuminated red smoke. Huge pantomime giants behind the diminutive songstrell.

So, this was about Tom after all? Wait! About Tom after Marco and Jackie? Oh, no! No, no, no, this is not what she wanted. She had told Ruberiot this stuff was a secret. Surely he wouldn’t dare include it. He had promised! He had told her he would use metaphor and allusion. He’d said he would put something real into the song, sure, but not the naked truth.

*Wrathful demon prince of dour hells,*
*She knew he deeply wished her heart was for himself!*  
*She proposed thus an option, all full of dread,*  
*She gathered all her courage and this is what she said.*  

*This is what she said,*  
*This is what she said!!*

On the stage, Star’s shadow rose up to face Tom’s. The real mewman princess looked panicked at Marco. She hadn’t told him yet! She had meant to, but, it was never the right time. This was not how he was supposed to find out about that night!

‘I’d like to lay together, if that’s fine by you:  
*There burns no more honest fondness, yet there’s passion in hate too.*  
*To soothe my pain, let us play a game.*’  
*Royal secret from royal shame.*  
*Royal secret from royal shaaame!*

A powerful chord and a piercing cry punctuated the end of the verse. Suddenly the stage lights turned outwards and blasted red at their maximum brightness, blinding everyone in the audience, before going dark in one fell swoop.

Star was horrified. He had said he would keep it all veiled behind metaphor and allusion but, if anything, that verse was worse than what she had actually said to Tom. Wasn’t it? That’s not what she had proposed, and she hadn’t been the one to propose it, and it certainly hadn’t been what she
intended! ...Had it?

Well, anyways, at least that seemed to be the end of it. Star tried to collect herself. Maybe she could still explain things to Marco. It’s not like he even was her boyfriend at the time! What she did back then was none of his business!

As for her mom, and her people, well, Ruberioth had not outright said that she had sex with Tom. Maybe they could all be convinced they had, I dunno, like, cuddled together or something. This was bad, but it could have been so much worse.

As soon as Star thought that, the stage begun lighting up again. The fog seemed much thinner this time, and it was a light gray rather than bright red. Ruberiot was there in the middle of the platform once more, his guitar laying on the floor, and he had changed his outfit again. He wore loosely fitting jeans and a ragged t-shirt with a musical note inside a star on the middle. He also wore an impractical amount of golden jewelry for some reason, and a blue baseball cap turned backwards on his head. He looked down at the floor and counted the beat with his left foot. Apparently, he wasn’t quite done yet.

Then Star saw the painted curtain behind the songstrel. It showed a crude rendering of an irregular stone brick wall, and a small river, and a bridge. She recognized it immediately, and her heart almost jumped to her throat. She felt paralyzed. It was a graffiti painting of the bridge where the three of them had released the ducks back into the creek, and where later that night she and Tom had... No, no way! It couldn’t be! Ruby wouldn’t do that! Would he?

With beats so inspired, and verses so fly,
I rap of the dalliances of Star Butterfly!

He would! Oh damn it, he would! Also, a rap? What the hell, Ruberiot? What the hell?! Star considered for a moment just taking her wand and blasting the stage, or creating a distraction somehow. Or plain just running away herself. But she couldn’t move a finger. She felt her palms get sweaty. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the shocked, huge-eyed expressions on Jackie and Marco’s faces, as they begun processing the next few lines.

Under moonlight she craves alleviation,
Heart, loins, both need consolation.
She knows she is a liar, and feels like she cheats,
Got the harsh stone floor, not her silky bedsheets!

As Ruberiot busted out such crude lyrics, a shadow play unfolded behind him, cast on the wall drawn on the curtain. The figures were smaller than before but more sharply defined. Star wasn’t able to see the marionetes casting them, but she could clearly make out the shadow representing herself as it embraced and kissed the shadow representing Tom.

She saw the projected shapes fall together into the floor, in a clear depiction of two people having sex together. What was Ruberiot thinking?! How on Mewni was this any sort of metaphor?! Star was now hoping the chair she was sitting on would swallow her whole. She could not wait for this torture to end.

And he pushes and pulls, he cuts and he bruises,
Demon prince’s charms with deep carnal uses.
Release that she finds, amidst all this harming,
it fails to replace her one true prince charming!

A second spotlight shone on the stage, far up and to the left. Now it was shadow-Marco and
shadow-Jackie, hugging each other while they sat together on the outline of a shadowy bed, clearly making out.

Star ventured a look towards her friends, and saw that they were also beet red and looking around uncomfortably.

Everyone else in the entire kingdom seemed transfixed, silently looking at the scene in front of them, in a mixture of shock and morbid curiosity. Star saw her shadowy doppelganger conspicuously look up towards the scene involving Marco and Jackie, even as shadow-Tom still laid atop her.

Our princess so valiant, our princess so bold,  
she slays down her foe with an action so cold.  
For her lips do reveal, what her touches must hide,  
the name of the boy that lits her inside!

A red heart lit up in the middle of her shadow and Marco’s, and the shadow representing Tom stood up and ran away, in obvious pain and anger. The lights dimmed down. The shadows vanished, and Ruberiot took up his guitar again.

‘Please be over... please be over...’ Star thought to herself.

Then again, how could it not be? Ruberiot had already sung everything she had told him, in excruciating and indecent detail. There literally could not be anything worse to come!

The wooden puppets from earlier floated into the stage: Star, Marco and Jackie. They looked at one another and then down towards the floor as if sad. The next few chords were slow and acoustic, sounding almost like waltz music. Ruberiot continued in a soft melodious voice.

Our story has a happy ending,  
for our princess and her future king,  
confession and feelings requited,  
that result in a triangular swing.

The puppets acted as if they were speaking to each other, until finally they all held hands and begun floating up, rotating as they all danced together.

For Marco is Jackie’s and Staaaar’s!  
And it works for our princess  
...so faaar!

And with one last guitar riff, Ruberiot fell silent and bowed deeply to the audience.

Moments passed, and not a noise was heard. Then a steady confused murmur rose from the crowd.

“What’s wrong? You are supposed to be clapping!” the songstrel spoke finally. His pleas immediately drowned by angry shouts from the audience.

Star heard some very unkind words used to describe her and her friends, and those were just the one’s she recognized. She looked at Marco and Jackie. They both stared back at her in shock, without saying a word. Eventually, she couldn’t help but avoid their gaze. She looked at her mom, expecting to see anger in her eyes, but Queen Moon’s regretful expression hurt her even more than the fury she expected.

The queen lifted herself up from her chair and motioned everyone to go back into the castle, Star
and her friends first. Star’s dad looked like he was about to chase after them, his angry stare still trained on Marco, but Moon put her arm in front of him, stopping his husband.

---

“Star!” Moon was the first to speak. “What was that?!” She seemed furious, genuinely confused, and very uncomfortable, all at once.

“Mom, I am sorry, I didn’t know, I didn’t think... I am sorry, ok?” She was.

Under other circumstances she would have argued more, reminded her mom she could not have done the kind of fluffy pop song she expected. But this time she was truly sorry, and she didn’t even know what for. For the song? For Tom? For Jackie and Marco?

“Star, as a ruler, there are some things you don’t say about yourself. What you tell your people has implications, for you and for your friends,” Moon explained, angrily. “I can’t believe you would be so foolish as to encourage these sort of rumors about yourself!”

“Mom, I swear I didn’t know Ruberiot would say anything about that,” Star replied. Then, she processed what her mom was saying. Rumors? Did she think the song was fake? Or was it that she wanted to pretend it was fake? Was it only the citizens of Mewni Moon cared about? Or did her mother too wanted to pretend Star was a perfect little princess? Star knew this was hardly the time to make things worse, but something in Moon’s words just angered her, beyond the shame and dread she now felt. “But well, mom, they are not rumors. Marco is my boyfriend! ... mine and Jackie’s...” The Mewman princess shot her mother a determined look.

Queen Moon sighed and lifted a hand to her forehead, massaging her temple. “And I suppose you have given full thought to what it would mean for Mewni to have a king regent with a second wife? Or for your other friend to accept a more, let’s say, secondary position, for the sake of the monarchy?”

“What?! Mom, no, I mean, I haven’t even thought about... he is my boyfriend, but well... we never talked about...” Star protested. King regent? She was pretty certain she loved Marco, but that sounded too, well, permanent. She wasn’t even on board with the idea of being queen herself. Thinking about a royal husband was the furthest thing from her mind.

“I know, I know, sweetie. But well, that’s what a lot of people in Mewni are going to be discussing tonight. And they will discuss it again, whenever Marco comes to visit, or for how ever long you stay on Earth. Incidentally, they will also discuss whether consorting with demons makes one a dark queen, in the same way consorting with monsters does. It is all nonsense, of course, but it might just be how they see it.

“Star, the magic wand guarantees your own right of succession, no matter how many traditions you break, or how flagrantly. But that doesn’t mean there are never consequences. Honestly, in the long run this all could lead to pretty bad things happening, mostly to her, and perhaps to the boy. Unfortunately, there are people in Mewni that would see harming your friend as a reasonable precaution to prevent future issues with the royal succession. Some would even see it as a service to you.” Moon looked to the side, as if embarrassed of what she was about to suggest next, “Perhaps the best course of action is for you to distance yourself from your Earth friends. Maybe if we do that, further rumors can be avoided...”

“Mom?! Star was shocked. Was her mom saying she could not date Marco anymore? Or that she could not go back to Earth? “No, I love Marco! I might not know much about the future, but I don’t want to not see him again, or Jackie either! Not over a stupid song!”
“A song that has put them both in danger, and you and me in a very delicate political position,” the queen retorted, sounding as tired and frustrated as Star was feeling. “What do you want me to do, Star?!”

“I want you,” a fierce voice remarked behind the princess, “to do your job!”

Hekapoo walked between Star and Queen Moon, cutting through the tense atmosphere like a hot knife through butter, staring up at the monarch of Mewni with a fierce glare.

“Hekapoo, I am sorry, but this is kind of an emergency...” Star’s mom began.

“So is Omnitraxus being missing!” Hekapoo remarked. “An emergency you promised to handle before anything else. Certainly before the political implications of your daughter’s teenage indiscretions. Or is the kingdom going to fall tonight just because some people are going to be talking badly about the princess’ private matters? Because, well, if so, certainly a lot has changed since the days when you first took the throne...”

Moon’s cheeks reddened slightly, and Star felt like she was missing some subtext to this conversation, a lot of subtext, actually.

The queen coughed briefly. “Yeah, well, you are right, of course, Hekapoo. Star, we will discuss this fully sometime soon. It might yet be salvageable, somehow. But please, try to not drop any more shocking revelations on the kingdom, at least for a while...”

Hekapoo followed Moon through a huge double door. Lekmet, Romulus and even King River followed close behind.

After they were all gone, Star felt a hand drop on her shoulder. She looked back to see, well, Hekapoo again! No matter how many times she did that, her whole cloning thing was always super weird!

“Well, nicely done, kid, you really fucked up this time,” the sorceress smiled at her, giving her at once a mocking grin and a comforting wink.

“Yeah, I know,” Star replied with a half-smile.

This Hekapoo just gave her a nod of acknowledgement and poofed out of existence. The princess was unspeakably thankful at the high commissioner for running interference like that.

Unfortunately, her mom wasn’t the only one Star had to talk to right now. She heard a voice behind her way before she was done processing the previous exchange, “Eh, Star...”

It was Jackie, but she seemed very un-Jackie like. She was looking at the floor and her voice felt flat and uncertain.

“Jackie, I am so sorry, I...” Star begun, but Jackie cut her off with a hand gesture.

“Actually, Star, I am sorry too. First, I sort of overheard your conversation with your mom right now, so, well, sorry about that,” the human girl apologized. “For the record, I understand if you decide not to go back to Earth because of what is best for yourself, for your mom, or for Marco. But, as far as I am concerned, I don’t care what kind of crazy political danger our relationship puts me in on Mewnie. We will figure stuff out if there is ever stuff to be figured out, but it is not anyone else’s business but ours. If your subjects disagree, they can go suck on a big fat juicy...” she trailed off.
“... lemon?” Star suggested. She hoped her tone made it perfectly clear she knew that wasn’t where the other girl was going with that sentence.

Jackie chuckled briefly, before getting back into a very serious expression. “Also, I want to apologize too for, well, for not really believing you when you said being a princess sort of sucked? I don’t know if you noticed at all but, today I’ve been, well... let’s just say I got impressed by your life here, and how much people care about you and look up to you, and I sort of got a bit envious of that, you know?”

“Ptfff,” Star almost laughed. “If it were up to me, you could have it instead, all of it, Jackie.”

“Yeah, I know,” she looked around nervously. “Not sure I want it anymore. I think Marco knew already why you felt like you did about being a princess... I just didn’t fully get it, until now.”

Oh, right, Marco! “How is he doing?”

“Not well,” Jackie replied with a frown. “He is not really talking to me right now...”

Star felt a weight drop in her stomach. She turned around to see Marco with his forehead against a wall, fists closed. Oh, fuck. Guess he was taking the Tom thing worse than she had expected? Again, it wasn’t as if it was really any of his business, it was before they started dating, even if only by about twenty hours or so. Then again, considering how she had felt about him and Jackie...

Plus, even back then, Star actually liked Jackie. Marco hated Tom. Well, not as much a few days ago as he did when they first met. But those two, they were, well, on complicated terms. Competitive too. This was so not going to be an easy conversation. Star sighed.

“Hey, Marco!” She put her best happy face forward. “Guess that wasn’t as boring in the end as I feared. But, well, it was sort of terrible for a different reason...” she babbled at him.

“Star,” Marco spoke slowly, without turning back, looking at the floor, his clenched fist trembling in anger. “It’s just... well, why didn’t you tell me?”

Chapter End Notes

Marco is not taking it well.

Also, we are 100% off the rails now! As in, there is no more viable canon continuity that this fic will follow. From here on out, anything can happen! And there have been some interesting predictions in the comments... ;}

Coming up next: Chapter 13: ‘Cause she's a Rebel Princess, She's the Best
'Cause she's a Rebel Princess, She's the Best

Chapter Summary

In which things are awkward between Star and Marco, there is an abundance of princesses, Hekapoo and Moon converse, and yet another villain is introduced.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13: 'Cause she's a Rebel Princess, She’s the Best

‘Cause she’s a rebel princess, she's the best
She's a ball of lightning in a hot pink dress
- The Songstrel Ruberiot (both continuities)

“Star,” Marco spoke slowly, without turning back, looking at the floor, his clenched fist trembling in anger. “It’s just... well, why didn’t you tell me?”

Deep hurt dripped from the boy’s quiet voice. He seemed to carefully weight every word, as if trying to hold back something of which he himself felt ashamed. Star thought she could hear the tiniest hint of an accusatory note, lingering just below the surface, but she wasn’t sure. She knew him better than just about anyone, and yet, for once, she couldn’t read him. The princess took a deep breath.

“I am sorry, Marco, alright,” she mustered. She was sorry about the whole Tom incident, and not only because of what the people of Mewnie might think of her now, or because of how much it apparently pained Marco. That night had ended up in nothing but bad feelings for everyone involved, and apparently her decisions that day were not yet done messing up her life. Fuck Tom! Well, no, actually, don’t fuck Tom. That was what caused the problem in the first place!

Then again, if she hadn’t done that, would she and Marco have ever gotten together? Without Janna’s bizarre plot, without that night of imagining Marco while laying with Tom, without the magical link she had not yet even told him about, without him shouting her name to Jackie, without Jackie’s crazy-awesomeness... without all of that, would they have ever come to date? If the answer was no, then no matter the bad feelings, and no matter the song, and no matter the kingdom, and no matter her mom, she had to stand by her decision. That night with Tom was worth it, but only because it brought her and Marco together. Unless, of course, it was now about to break them apart.

“Star, is not about you being sorry, it’s just...” Marco started to say something.

He was probably going to go on to say how she was a terrible person for sleeping with Tom, or at least to ask why she had chosen Tom specifically. She didn’t want to hear that. She didn’t have an answer. She couldn’t even explain to him how it had, in the end, been for the best. At least, she couldn’t do so without telling Marco her last shameful secret, that of the seeing-eye spell, at a time where it could only worsen things.
Instead, Star cut him off. “Look, Marco, I really am sorry,” she apologized again, lamely. If only Janna were here. The troublemaker girl always knew what to say in this kind of situation. “I am sorry, but, well, Marco, honestly? It is not really any of your business. It happened before we started dating, while you were dating Jackie. It was my choice, and perhaps it wasn’t a great choice, but well, since when I am known to always make great choices? It happened, it’s over. Can we just move on?”

“Wait, what? No, Star, Tom isn’t the problem!” Marco burst out, surprising Star. He turned around. He looked so angry, and at the same time, he seemed to be making an effort to stop himself from crying. Star was trying to contain her own tears as well. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t trust Tom, and if he did anything to hurt you... if he mistreated you in any way... well, never mind. You once said you could handle a demon, and I know you can take care of yourself. I know you don’t need a hero, Star...”

The mewman girl thought back to when she had said that to her best friend. It seemed so long ago now, another lifetime almost. The night of the Blood Moon. It had been her last date with Tom, and her first dance with Marco. She had made a foolish decision in accepting the demon prince’s invitation and Marco, concerned for her safety, had followed after her. She had been annoyed at her friend. Annoyed that he didn’t trust her to take care of herself, to make her own mistakes and fix them on her own. Frankly, even if she didn’t exactly regret Marco having been there, she felt that, back then, she had been mostly in the right.

She was much less sure of her ability to handle Tom after that night under the bridge, however, after how defenseless she had felt in the end, unable to even dip down into herself. But Tom had not, in fact, harmed her. If anything, it had been the other way around. Star wondered if Marco somehow intuited that, if that was why he was angry. Did he perceive that she had, in a way, used Tom to get him instead? Would he think she was a horrible person for it?

“Oh, Marco, if Tom isn’t the issue, then what is it?”

“Star, it’s just, I wish you had told me. I mean, I wish that you had told me about...”

Marco’s words were drowned by an unexpected ‘Whoosh!’ sound, and a surprised yelp from Jackie.

The skateboarder girl had drifted towards the other corner of the huge hall, giving Star and Marco space to sort things out, literally. She had been looking away from the both of them, in what Star thought was her best effort not to eavesdrop, without actually having to leave the room. Star figured her friend didn’t want to risk running into Moon, the high commission, or basically anyone in the entire kingdom who had listened to the song and now probably thought of her as the concubine of Mewni’s future king, the spare they had to get rid of, or whatever such utter nonsense.

However, the way the girl had positioned herself meant she was easily taken by surprise as a tear opened up in the fabric of reality, right behind her. The tips of a pair of scissors materialized themselves in mid air, quickly cutting a shimmering blue portal through the empty space.

Jackie was even more surprised, evidenced by a wide-eyed open-mouthed break of her usual cool composure, when a disembodied horned horse head came out flying from the portal, its tongue still somehow holding on to the dimensional scissors. Star herself barely noticed the diminutive winged pixie girl that emerged next, following the first intruder.

“Whatssuuup B-fly!?” Princess Pony Head shouted. She glanced up and down at her Song Day outfit. “Looking goooood, girl!”
“Pony Head?!” Star shouted back, partly in surprise, partly in excitement. Despite the awful awful timing, it was good to once again see her best bestie in all of Mewnie. “What are you doing here? I thought you were partying it up in St. O’s!”

“Well, yeah, about that... well, Star, don’t get too worried or anything, but we might have run into a little bit of trouble over there...” Pony Head did that nervous looking around thing she always did whenever she got involved in some truly bad stuff and didn’t want to admit it. “Things are not as good as when you two left. Turns out we might need a seriously baaad-ass princess to come and set some heads right. Ya know what I mean?”

“I have absolutely no idea what you mean...” Star admitted. “But I am in!”

She twirled her wand around in her hand and gave her best attempt at a menacing look. If they needed a seriously bad-ass princess, they had come to the right place.

Ok, sure, she really really needed to finish having this talk with Marco first. But, then again, the talk was super mega awkward. So, maybe this was for the best? And, well, if the princesses of St O’s needed her, if her bestie needed her, then how could she say no?

Marco scowled, not so much at her, but rather at the interrupting unicorn princess. It was clear that he hadn’t gotten what he needed off his chest. Unfortunately, Star wasn’t sure she wanted, or could handle, to hear it right now. Perhaps if she ignored the issue long enough, Marco would forget, or at least, calm down somewhat.

Avoidance! Just as she originally planned to respond to her song day. And well, hadn’t she been right back then? If she hadn’t talked to Ruberiot, then none of this would have happened! Of course, it wasn’t like she was planning on never again talking to Marco. She just needed to, like, give both him and herself a little time to think. That was a good idea, right? Right?

“Actually, B-fly, don’t take this the wrong way, I know we are both best besties, and totally super-tough badass princesses and all... but I kinda meant Earth Turd...” Pony Head admitted sheepishly. He shot a quick look Marco’s way, and rolled her eyes.

“Me?!” Marco glanced confused at Star, then back at the body-absent princess. “This is kind of a bad time for jokes, Pointy-Head...”

Before he could say another word, the pixie girl came up flying towards them. She quickly positioned herself so she was hovering in between Pony Head and the two kids, and gave Marco a deep supplicant bow.

“Please, Princess Marco! I am Princess Glintwisp of Pixtopia. I am sorry to ask, especially if we have indeed come at a bad time. But, for the good of the revolution, in the name of all princesses everywhere, I implore you! We need your help once more. Some of the girls have gone astray, and I fear that without your inspiration and leadership, we might soon lose the very individuality we fought to achieve!”

Seeing as how this was now anything but a private moment, Jackie walked towards the group. She shot their boyfriend a quizzical look. “Princess Marco?”

----

“So,” Jackie finally spoke, once Pony Head first, then Star, were done bringing her up to date with the situation, more or less. “Let me see if I got this all straight: There is, or used to be, an inter-dimensional school dedicated to literally brainwashing princesses - which, by the way, fuck that!”
“You can say that again,” commented Star, with a shudder.

“And flying horse-head over here, which happens to be Star’s childhood friend, was sent there by her own family,” the human girl continued her recap.

“Excuse me?! Friend? I happen to be Star’s bestest bestie overall! And it is Flying Princess Horse-Head to you, monkey-face!” Pony Head retorted.

“Whatever,” Jackie shrugged. It had been clear for a while that the pony princess didn’t like her much, and it was getting to be fairly mutual. From what Marco had said, she never liked any of Star’s friends at first. She was, ‘possessive’, whatever that meant. In any case, Jackie Lynn Thomas wasn’t going to be pushed around by a disembodied horse head, at least not now that the initial shock wore off. “The point is, Star and Marco went there to throw horse-head a birthday party, and in the process he ended up leading a rebellion. While dressed like a princess, for some reason.”

“Oh, you should have seen it, Jackie!” Star shouted excitedly. “You have no idea how well Marco pulls off a pink dress!”

“Star!” Marco protested. The mewman princess seemed to suddenly remember she and the boy were not in the best terms right now, and begun to stammer an apology.

“Actually, I can see that, Star,” Jackie tried to make the save. Honestly, she wasn’t sure what Marco’s issue was. Yes, the song had been uncomfortable, for everyone involved. But if there was anyone who should be in a sullen mood over that, it was Star. Marco and herself had at most gotten splash damage from that particular bomb. “And he, or rather ‘she’, somehow became an icon of a revolutionary movement of princesses. Which, incidentally, mostly consisted of turning St O’s into a party school. Correct so far?”

“Not just a party school, monkey-face, the best party school in the multiverse!” Pony Head insisted. “Mostly because it had me in it! Of course!” The disembodied horse head made a puckered lips expression that Jackie assumed was meant to be sexy, but was instead disturbing in the extreme.

“Sure, whatever. Anyways, the problem is that it is not about having a party school anymore, not since this Miss White appeared and took over the ‘movement’, correct?” Jackie finished. “And now you want Marco to go chase this person away, just as he did with Miss Heinous.”

“It’s Princess White, not Miss White, and, well, not quite. We want Princess Marco to remind the girls of the ideas of the revolution: individuality, self expression, freedom!” Princess Glintwisp finally interjected. “White claims to care about that, but everything is about power and control for her in the end. I think the girls know that. But they won’t listen to us. They are too scared. But with Princess Marco to inspire them again, I think we have a chance!”

“So, basically,” Jackie reasoned. “You had a revolution, which ended up propping a dictator of sorts, and now you are asking the original revolutionaries to come back and oppose this character? Uh, Marco, I know you are not as much of a history nerd as I am, but, well, you know this is a bad idea, right?”

“Uh, why would it be a bad idea?” interjected Star.

“Nah, she is right, Star,” Marco sighed. “I can see this ending badly. But I guess if things are as bad as these two say they are, then we don’t really have a choice. I mean, we kind of created this whole situation in the first place. Sorry to ask now, and... well... sorry to postpone... you know
what, but... could you... um, princess me?” He gave Jackie a concerned look. “Hopefully this isn’t going to be too weird?”

“Yeah, right, of course, Marco,” Star stammered awkwardly.

What the hell was wrong between the two of them? Jackie thought to herself. This was far more awkward than Marco in a dress could ever possibly be.

Star raised her wand, gave it a swirl and...

“Radiant Shadow Transform!!”

Marco’s body rose up into the air, coming to stand seemingly suspended right below the hall’s tall ceiling. His skin and clothes became covered in blinding bright purple light, dissolving into it. Further streams of white light crisscrossed all over his body as it contorted in midair like a ballet dancer. It was impossible to see properly through the spell’s light show, but it seemed like it first made his princely suit vanish, replacing it then bit by bit with a distinctly feminine attire.

Honestly, it was surprising how well Marco could pull that off too. The magical glow gradually faded away as he floated back towards them, revealing a puffy pink dress with a huge ribbon over his waist. His heeled feet gracefully touched down on the ground, almost silently. He had a determined and confident expression Jackie had only occasionally seen on him. It was almost like he was wearing a battle outfit of sorts, rather than a frilly pink dress.

“All right, Pointy-Head, Glitterwisp, let’s go set things straight, my wayward sisters!” Marco remarked.

The pixie princess saluted him, while Pony Head simply took out the scissors again and attempted to hand them to Marco. He shook his head, taking his own pair of scissors from under the dress’ skirt. An embossed name gleamed on them in fiery letters: ‘MARCO’. With a quick movement, he cut a doorway in the air, and confidently strode through it. The two St O’s princesses followed after him.

The Mewman princess was about to follow suit, but Jackie stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. “Wait, Star, are you alright? What happened with you and Marco?”

“I,” Star paused, uncomfortable. “I am not sure, Jackie...”

“Well, he will come around, I am sure of it. He loves you, Star, and you love him too. A stupid song isn’t going to change that, right?” the human girl tried to reassure her friend, and was glad to see Star smile faintly and nod in response. “But... Star, and I know is not the best timing... before we jump in through there, I sort of have a favor to ask from you....”

----

THROUGH UNITY, VICTORY

Saint Olga’s had always been a grim gray place. It was grim and gray, if luxuriously outfitted, when Miss Heinous administered it. It had remained grim and gray, and far less cared for, when the princesses took over, no matter what Pointy-head said about her own brief tenure as unofficial leader of the rebel princess movement. But now, it looked grimmer and grayer than ever. To the prison-like barbwire fence that surrounded the complex, someone had added protruding bits and pieces of broken glass, and the decor became only more oppressive and martial once you went past the gate.
Once inside the courtyard, Marco noticed that the old posters, showing her as Princess Marco, had been ripped off from the walls. Instead, imposing black placards showed a clenched red fist holding a crown. Disturbingly bellicose slogans were often printed atop, or around, the insignia.

DOWN WITH THE TYRANTS! PRINCESSES RULE

Ok, that one didn’t even make sense. Or maybe it made too much sense?

Of course princesses rule, or well, they were going to rule. So, who the hell were the tyrants, then? Their parents? Star and Moon might not have always seen eye to eye on everything, and he had the vague impression that they had ended in especially bad terms after Star’s song. But, as he looked at the posters along the courtyard walls, Marco felt these princesses were taking things way too far.

SOME FREEDOMS MUST BE POSTPONED FOR THE CAUSE

“Freedom is the cause...” he muttered his own spontaneous retort, as he walked past that particular sign.

Pony Head and Glintwisp floated close by, almost huddled around him. The pixie princess nodded in silent acknowledgment of his ‘wise’ proclamation. They both looked cowed, even more so that they had been under Heinous and her solitary conformance chamber.

Marco wondered where Star and Jackie were now. He had left the portal open for them, but when they didn’t immediately follow, he decided to go ahead and take point. He needed to survey the situation before their group attracted any attention, to move while they still had the element of surprise, just like his favorite war movie hero, Rick Resilient. From what he could see, the two resident princesses had not been exaggerating when they described how bad the situation was.

“You got to be kidding me, there is no way that one is not on purpose!” came a voice from behind Marco.

As he turned around, he saw Jackie casually leaning against the inside of the courtyard walls, just past the outer door, pointing at one particular slogan he had completely missed:

ALL PRINCESSES ARE EQUAL,
BUT SOME ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

Now, Marco would normally have commented on the absurdity of the poster. He had read Animal Farm too! Ok, alright, he watched the cartoon movie, same thing.

However, he was momentarily rendered speechless by the version of Jackie that confronted him. Short hair, combed back. A pair of dark green pants and matching shoulder pads, adorned in gold trimming. A white vest, buttoned in gold to her left side, and embroidered with a coat of arms: two swords crossing atop a skateboard bursting out of a seashell. Black gloves and black equestrian boots. A short red velvet cape. Jackie was standing with his feet, sorry, her feet, more than shoulder width apart and glancing at Princess Marco with a cocksure grin on his, no, her, face. She was pulling the whole ‘Prince Charming’ look better than Marco was comfortable admitting. In fact, he was uncomfortably sure that Jackie looked far better in her own prince outfit, than he had in his, merely hours ago.

“Jackie? What are you doing?!” he stammered in confusion. Did it meant he was gay if he thought she was handsome? Or did it mean just the opposite? Marco had long come to feel comfortable with being in a dress, even as he worried what his long-time crush might think of him for that. Turns out he needed not worry. But, instead, seeing Jackie in such a masculine presentation was a
new and surreal experience for him. He liked it, and frankly wasn’t fully sure what that said about himself.

“Matching my beautiful and brave princess, of course.” Jackie grinned as she advanced towards him in surprisingly large strides. “I figured, if you are going to be Princess Marco, then I shall be Prince Jackie... at your service milady!” She put a hand behind her back and bowed dramatically. Before Marco could protest that he was, in truth, not a ‘milady’, Jackie continued, “Or should it be Prince Jack?”

“I’d keep going with Jackie,” chimed up Star as she finally came in through St O’s gate, in the same ‘bad princess’ getup she had worn the first time they were here. “Matches ‘Princess Marco’ better.”

“Are you sure?” Jackie asked, after seeming to ponder the question for a second. She made a gesture of stroking her, nonexistent, beard. “I feel like a Jack.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about them gorgeous! I’ll call you whatever you like,” came a nasal voice from way above their position. “Right after I deliver these traitors to Princess White!”

Following the voice, out of one of the manor’s windows, jumped a huge monstrous purple woman. She had an elephant trunk for a nose and a blue hairdo larger than her already gargantuan head. She wore a blue frilly dress the size of a small camping tent and was covered in jewelry, including a gem-encrusted golden crown. Out of the corners of her mouth, protruded two pointed tusks. Moving faster than could reasonably be expected from her size, she positioned herself behind Jackie, grabbed her from the waist and pointed a strange device directly at the human’s face. A blinding flash exploded around them as she pushed the trigger.

“Ca-me-ra!” the ugly princess shouted as she took a selfie of herself with the newly minted handsome prince of the group. She then grabbed Jackie’s arm, and twisted it behind her. “Now, deserter Princess Marco, traitor Princess Pony Head, traitor Princess Glintwisp, and,” she looked at Star up and down, confused, “and you, whoever you are! Follow me, or I will be forced to remove this hunk’s dreamy face!”

Marco looked at Jackie first. He felt calmer when he saw she seemed more disoriented than actually afraid. He glanced then at Star, and finally at the criminal princess holding ‘her prince’ hostage. He and Star had met her once before, when she tried to steal the mewman princess’s face in a harebrained scheme to escape from St. O’s. Fortunately, they managed to throw the book at her that time, literally as well as figuratively. Frankly, after Heinous, and Toffee, and whatever that snake-thing Tom had sprung on them the other week was, Marco was not too scared of the old dizzy monster.

“Sure, fine,” Princess Marco spoke defiantly. “Take me to your leader!” Truth be told, he always wanted to say that. “...and make sure the rest of the girls are there too! I think they are going to want to hear what I have to say to this ‘Princess White’ of yours.”

It was soon clear that didn’t need to worry about that. As they made their way through the manor’s halls and passageways, the six of them seemed to accumulate an ever growing crowd of curious onlookers among St. Olga’s former students.

Most of the princesses gave their captor a wide berth, but gawked from a safe distance at the group. Jackie played the defiant hostage well, an arrogant scowl on ‘his’ princely face. Princess Marco marched right behind the trollish princess that held ‘her’ prince captive. He herself held her head tall and fists clenched. Pony Head and Glintwisp seemed far more intimidated, marching a few steps behind Marco. Finally, Star brought up the rear, just ahead of the accumulating spectators.
They passed more and more red-fist posters on their way up the manor.

THE REVOLUTION IS MORE IMPORTANT,
THAN ANY INDIVIDUAL

“Embrace the princess mentality...” Marco heard Star mutter under her breath.

----

“So, that’s it, Hekapoo, the whole truth, in as much as I myself know it,” Moon admitted with a deep sigh.

She took a seat at the edge of her bed, and prepared herself for the onslaught of fury that the sorceress was sure to unleash upon her.

So be it. It would hardly be the first time she found herself on the receiving end of the other woman’s displeasure. It came with the territory. It was the other side of the coin, the one Star didn’t understand yet: having the power to make the big choices, but also having to live with the consequences. If it were up to Moon, her daughter would have been spared learning that lesson for a while longer. But, even as queen, it was not just up to her.

“You could have told us this months ago,” the Forger of Scissors noted calmly. She was looking out through the balcony of the royal bedchamber, giving her back to Moon, purposefully concealing her facial expression, rendering herself even more unreadable than usual. “You could have told me.”

“Yes, Hekapoo, I could have,” the queen admitted. She knew it was a mistake to not have brought the high commission in on this sooner, or at least the crafty sorceress in particular. But she had done what she did to protect Star, to protect her family from additional exposure. Fat good it had done, in the end. “I had it under control. I still do. Ludo has half the wand, he has the book, and he has Glossaryck. Admittedly, this is quite bad. But I assure you, even with all of that, he is hardly what I’d call a threat.”

“He was enough of a threat to steal the book from your daughter, Moon. Enough of a threat to drain the magic from many worlds. Enough of a threat to go after Omnitraxus...” Hekapoo retorted. Her flame crackled and sizzled atop her head, betraying her displeasure at her old friend and confidant.

“We don’t really know if those things truly are related,” the mewman reasoned, evenly. “Frankly, it disturbs me to think they might be. Lord Brudo didn’t give any indication that the young Avarius represented that kind of menace. He is not, well, you know...”

“Toffee?” Hekapoo completed the thought Queen Moon did not dare speak aloud.

It was a name that brought far too many unpleasant memories: the death of her mother, her deal with Eclipsa, the weight of leadership, the coldness in her own heart as she drew forth power from darkness, and from ancient evil. Then again, in way, being reminded of that fiend, of that monster in every sense of the word, also helped remind Moon of what and who she was.

“Not even close!” she responded forcefully. “And must I remind you, Hekapoo, that I dealt with Toffee as well? Without assistance or advice from you, or from the high commission.”

“With all due respect, Moon,” Hekapoo turned back, glaring at her, “you dealt with Toffee by dabbling in dark magic, by bargaining with the Queen of Darkness herself! It is only by the sheerest luck that your way of ‘dealing’ with Toffee did not doom us all! What makes you think Star will be just as lucky, if it comes to it?”
“It wasn’t luck, Hekapoo. I told you then, and I’ll tell you now, I know what I am doing!”

She didn’t. Not now, and definitely not back then.

She found the loophole in her deal with Eclipsa only in the last second. By failing to kill Toffee, she avoided having to fulfill her own end of the bargain with the imprisoned queen. Yet, had she hesitated only a second less, had she been a smidgen less or a smidgen more afraid, then Toffee would have died that morning by her hand. If he had, then Moon would have been left to deal with the consequences.

“Star won’t have to get lucky,” she swore, mostly to herself. “I will deal with this, without dragging her into it, and do it right. I will protect her. You need to understand... there is no way she will ever have to... to deal with what I dealt with... when my mother...”

The cool warrior-queen mask crumbled then, the unbreakable armor of Moon the Undaunted, and for a second she was princess Moon again. Poor little orphan princess Moon. Poor little orphan princess Moon. Tears fell down her eyes, tears only three people in her life had ever seen before. One was her husband, River. The other was Glossaryck, now missing. The final one was with her now, in this room. The fiery glare of the Forger softened as she walked back towards the Queen of Mewni.

“No, she won’t, Moon. Because we will protect you. I will protect you,” Hekapoo placed a hand on the monarch shoulder. “But you need to let me do that, and that means you don’t hide the truth from me, or from the high commission.”

“Yes, you are right Hekapoo,” Moon finally admitted, in full. “It’s just, it seemed like something we should be able to handle within the family. I didn’t want to expose Star to, well, you know. Not this early. I suppose she manages to get into enough trouble on her own... That awful song! Now she probably thinks I am a monster, but what would you have me do?”

“The hardest thing, Moon,” Hekapoo replied, somber, accepting the other woman’s sudden change of topic. “Nothing.”

“What?” the queen asked, not understanding.

“Let her and her friends deal with the consequences of what was in that song. Let them deal with the people of Mewnie if they must. You could have handled it when you were her age. Those kids can handle it too. You’d be shocked out of that hard royal skull of yours by what they can handle. Star is a strong kid, same as you were. What she can’t handle, though, is a mother she believes disapproves of her every choice,” the sorceress spoke with surprising insight, as she took as seat at the edge of the bed, right besides Moon.

It was ironic, the more she tried to shield her daughter from the harshness of the world, the more she herself became the face of that harshness. “Disapprove? What right do I have to disapprove? I just wish she were... a bit more thoughtful, and discrete, about the whole thing...”

“Well, that’s your style, Moon. But it is not Star’s. Don’t worry, she will find her own way. It is not my style either, by the way, but a deal is a deal,” Hekapoo remarked with a smile, right before she leaned forth to kiss the lips of her royal lover. In familiar warm lips, Moon found a measure of peace, after one of the toughest days she had had in a good long while.

----

The only way to describe it, was to say that it was a throne room improvised out of a mansion’s dining hall, or out of a very fancy school cafeteria. All the walls were lined with tables and chairs,
pushed aside to make room for a ragged red carpet, which itself looked as if it had been ripped out from the floor of a different room.

The carpet led to yet another table, atop which someone had affixed a sofa-chair and two normal wooden chairs. Of those, only the leftmost chair was empty. The walls were lined with some more of those disturbing, almost self-parodying, posters.

All in all, it was much less impressive, and far more disturbing, than the Butterfly Castle’s throne room. Or so thought Jackie, despite having been inside the later only briefly.

“Princess White! Glorious leader of the princess revolution! I bring you back the traitors, and the famed Princess Marco!” the bizarre woman that held her by the arm claimed, in a bored but practiced tone, and took a deep bow. Then, she extended the other arm, and with a quick movement took a picture of herself and of all the people behind her, including Marco, Star and Jackie, and a few dozen onlookers. “Ca-me-ra phone!”

The person sitting in the sofa chair, atop the table, raised an eyebrow, and silently regarded the presumptive captives. She was a slender goth-looking girl, seemingly not that much older than the three of them. She had long disheveled raven-black hair, skull-pale skin, and blood-red lips that easily twisted into a dangerous smirk. She wore an open spiked leather jacket and embroidered leather pants. Her top was a white blouse, with the now familiar fist-holding-a-crown symbol painted in red ink atop it. The crown in the symbol matched in design with the crown she wore atop her head, in bright shimmering silver. Hanging to the left side of her belt, glinted a wicked looking sword, with a skull atop the handle. ‘Princess White, I presume’, Jackie thought to herself.

“Princess Marco?” White spoke, bemusedly. She had a surprisingly melodious and inviting voice. “An honor, and a pleasure, for sure; to meet the foremother of our glorious revolution. Perhaps we could offer her and her two companions something to eat? Then we might bring her up to date with the progress the cause has made, in her, I assume quite explainable, absence?”

Dammit, whomever this girl was, she was a good public speaker. Jackie couldn’t help but notice how she was both appearing to politely welcome Princess Marco, while at the same time casting doubts on the other princesses’ minds about her. There was something more as well... wait, two companions? Jackie saw the goth princess surreptitiously make a gesture with her hand. Two other girls walked through the crowd towards them, throwing a muzzle and a bug net, respectively, on Pony Head and Glintwisp.

“Wait, what are they doing?!” Star protested in a surprised shout.

“Oh, surely Princess Marco would not be in any way associated with these traitors, now, would she?” the sitting princess smiled calmly.

“Of course they are with me!” Marco shouted. “Let them go. And, for the record, I think I have seen enough of your so called progress, thank you very much!”

Not precisely a master diplomat, thought Jackie, but he sure managed to pull off the defiant rebel leader role.

“Yeah, let my bestie go!” shouted Star, leveling her wand at the princess holding Pony Head. Not wanting to be outdone, Jackie elbowed the huge princess holding her, and quickly moved to grab the other girl’s bug net out of her hands.

To the side of the sofa-throne, in the one wooden chair that was occupied, a scrawny brunette of sharp features and piercing green eyes leaned to whisper something in White’s ear. “Ah... I see.
Princess Star Butterfly, yet another honor!

“Wait, you know who I am?” the Mewman asked, surprised.

Presumably, she was talking about her disguise, but the dark-haired princess decided to interpret it quite differently.

“Of course. Your reputation precedes you,” White stalled, attempting to distract them from their friends being dragged around. Only when she saw that further attempts would likely result in an all out brawl, she quietly gave the signal to her cronies to let go. Even then, that barely registered in her polite conversational tone. “Frankly, it is a miracle you did not end up among us, here in St. O’s. Or a shame, as the case might be. You would be such an asset for our revolution...”

“A revolution against whom, exactly?” Princess Marco interrupted. “Way I see it, Heinous was gone, the girls were free to embrace their individuality, then you came along and this is now what? A princess Soviet Union?”

“I am unfamiliar with that kingdom,” White replied, calmly. “As for against whom... well, against our oppressors, of course! Same fight you started, sister. Sure, you helped our sisters get rid of Heinous. Although, from what I have heard recently, you didn’t do as... permanent a job as I would have in your place...”

Permanent? Was she suggesting that Marco ought to have killed their former headmistress? The savage grin and the way White’s hand drifted towards the pommel of her sword, told Jackie the answer. Now, that miss Heinous did sound like a horrid character, but surely that was taking it a step too far. Then again, if she had to judge this whole thing by the standards of actual revolutions...

“In any case, Heinous was nothing but a lackey of the true oppressors!” White voice swiftly rose into a booming tone. “The ones who sent these princesses here, to be brainwashed, to be enslaved to their lineages and to their subjects! Who are they to tell us who we should be?! What we should do?! I say we pay them back! No longer shall any princess be beholden to the whims of her line or her kingdom!”

“Yeah!” shouted Star, as did many other princesses among the crowd. Most of the observers, however, wisely kept silent. Then the Mewman’s princess expression seemed to change, as she realized to what she was agreeing exactly. “Wait, no! You cannot mean that we should... hurt our parents?”

“No, of course not,” White’s face softened. “Not your parents, princess Star. Like I said, your reputation as a rebel, as one of us, does you great honor. But I will admit that your parents, whatever their faults might be, never sent you to a place like St. O’s. However... the parents of most of these girls did do just that! They willingly subjected their kids to imprisonment and brainwashing! If that doesn’t make them, and their entire kingdoms, evil, if that doesn’t make them worthy of being overthrown, then what does?!”

“Look,” Marco raised a hand. Standing on the floor, as the other princess straightened herself atop her throne, he looked much feeble by comparison. Jackie figured that was entirely intentional on White’s part. It was probably the whole point of setting up this makeshift royal hall in the first place. “I am not saying that it is right to send anyone to a place like what this used to be. But I don’t think these girls’ parents are expecting their daughters to be brainwashed. They think this is a place to teach them the skills that they need, to be good rulers...”

“There is only one skill necessary to rule,” the goth princess smirked. “Strength! And together, we
have strength in abundance!”

“No,” Princess Marco asserted herself, not willing to let that one slide. And Jackie felt no small degree of admiration for her frilly-dressed boyfriend. “Ruling through strength only makes you a tyrant, or a dictator. Look, I am not saying each princess shouldn’t be free to be themselves, to be who they truly are, each and every one of our wayward sisters. They should be free to use their gifts to be the best versions of themselves instead of a cookie-cutter extension of their respective royal families. But when they rule, and they rule their way, they should still be doing what is right for their people! If you use strength to intimidate and cow others into submission, then that makes you the oppressors!” Princess Marco paused her speech, and Jackie noticed a few murmurs of agreement within the gathered crowd. “Besides, are you truly suggesting that these girls kill their own parents?”

“Why not?” White retorted. “After all, I killed my mother!”

More murmurs. Star gasped. She suddenly looked pale, and horrified. Even Jackie felt sick to her stomach, and she was neither a princess, nor had ever been caught agreeing with the lunatic in question.

“So yes, strength, and resolve, are all that stands between each and everyone of us and complete freedom and independence, the kind that only comes with power,” she continued. “I would know. I now rule my kingdom, and I do so entirely my way, without lineages or tradition. Without being beholden to anyone but myself!”

“And I assume your people love you for it?” retorted Marco, sarcastically.

“Absolutely,” the other princess responded with a smile. “You see, my mother was an evil queen.”

“Then I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Princess Marco quipped.

Suddenly, the sitting princess jumped out of her throne, her hands gripping the sofa armrests until they broke under the pressure into a shower of splinters. Her eyes were wide open and her teeth clenched in a furious rictus. “What. Did. You! Just! Say?!” Her previous composure had gone in an instant, and she seemed to barely keep enough self control not to jump down from the table and charge against Marco.

At first, Jackie thought White simply resented the comparison to her mother. But then it hit her. It wasn’t just being compared to her mother that bothered Princess White. It was the saying itself! Rather, it had been a single word in the saying: apple. She had reacted as soon as that word was mentioned.

Everything seemed to fall into place all at once then for the Earth girl: ‘My mother was an evil queen’. Apple. Princess White. Coal-black hair, blood-red lips, skin as white as snow... “Oh, you gotta be fucking kidding me! Marco, I think you are debating Snow White!”

The goth blinked twice, and seemed to calm down, momentarily. “I haven’t been called by that name in a very long time... and you are?”

“Prince,” she thought for a second, “Jack. Jack as in the giant killer.” She spoke with the utmost bravado, or at least all she could muster. Then, mentally, she added, ‘and if you believe that, I also have a bag of magic beans to sell you’.

“Well, princess Marco, prince... Jack,” Snow White spat the name, “I see my arguments fall on deaf ears. So I propose we put our ideals to a test, a trial on the morrow!” She smiled wickedly. A
wicked queen smile, thought Jackie. “Cass, tell me this, and only this, will our dear Princess Marco once again flee from us unseen during the night?”

The green eyes of the woman sitting besides White turned her piercing gaze towards Marco, as she seemed to concentrate.

“She will stay,” she answered simply.

“Of course! I will debate you any day you want, sister!” Princess Marco quickly retorted. Jackie, however, smelled a rat.

“It is set, then,” Snow White proclaimed, “tomorrow at dawn. A trial by combat!”

Chapter End Notes

The original Chapter 13 was almost twice as long as it is now. Based on previous experiences with long chapters, I have decided to break it up into two parts. Unfortunately, this means that while the plot moves forward, the situation between Star and Marco remains unresolved.

Now, some people might say that I had plenty enough time to resolve it in this chapter, had I not thrown gratuitous Moonkapoo at you all and introduced that ridiculous evil Snow White fellow. But to those people I say: Where would be the fun in that? ;)

Coming up next: Chapter 14: A Thunderstorm Roaring Through the Night
In which ‘no boys allowed’ backfires terribly, a letter arrives, and a plan to fight an evil princess is conceived.
Chapter 14: A Thunderstorm Roaring Through the Night

She’s a thunderstorm roaring through the night
She’s our shooting star, and she’s lighting up the sky!
- The Songstrel Ruberiot (both continuities)

After Princess White’s latest proclamation, the five of them were quickly escorted to three separate rooms within the mansion. Pony Head and Glintwisp were locked in together, as were Marco and Star. Jackie was shuffled into her own room, in what the princess of Mewnie suspected was an ironic attempt at enforcing some bizarre ‘no boys allowed’ rule.

If you asked her, that was closer to Heinous’ way of thinking than that of a true rebel princess, specially the party princesses of St. O’s. But it seemed that, for all her talk about fighting oppressors, Saint Olga’s under White’s leadership was even more oppressive than it had ever been before. Was that even possible? How was that even possible?

Anyways, that all didn’t matter, because there were two things right now that seemed more important to Star Butterfly than the future of the St. O’s princess’ rebellion.

The first was that, come tomorrow, Marco was supposed to fight some crazy mother-killing princess from hell. And, well, is not like Star doubted her bestie’s fighting skills - which were, like, totally super awesome - but she had never seen him fight with a sword, much less in a formal duel. She was sure White would declare herself the challenged party, despite calling for the trial, simply because it was Princess Marco coming into her... kingdom? dominion? or, like, her little fiefdom? As opposed to vice versa. So, Star needed to advice Marco both on sword fighting, and on royal dueling norms, and is not like she ever had paid much attention to either of those things herself!

Then, of course, there was the second thing. The part that made her sad to room with her best friend in the whole multiverse, with her... was he even still her boyfriend? The question itself made her chest hurt and her stomach twist like she needed to puke. It was the question that she had been trying to ignore the whole night. The part where Marco maybe hated her now for being a manipulative skank!

They waited there, in long uncomfortable silence, standing inside a somberly decorated room that was twice the size of Marco’s, yet smaller than Star’s own. Neither of them quite able to bring themselves to be the first to speak.

“Star, we need to talk,” Marco offered. He walked in and sat on the jacobean chair, by the mirror,
leaving Star to take over the huge bed in the middle.

She barely noticed the furnishings herself. Marco loved this old-fashioned overly-ornamented royal crap that was all over the place in St. O’s. Honestly, she liked Earth furniture way better. There was even some you could assemble and disassemble, without using magic! How cool was that? But, yeah, not the time for thinking about cool things. Rather, it was the time to finally face the music, as it were. Or maybe, maybe she didn’t even have the time for that.

“We don’t, Marco,” she spoke, “If I hurt you, then I am sorry, and if you hate me... well... never mind, my point is that tomorrow’s duel is what we should be talking about. A duel is not just like a regular brawl, Marco. In this case, I think it might be way more dangerous, like, not fun-dangerous, dangerous-dangerous,” she tried to explain, but he cut her off.

“No, Star. All the more reason we need to talk. If tomorrow I am going to get skewed by a fairytale character turned twentieth century dictator, then there is something I need to tell you first! I’ve been thinking about it all night...” He looked up at her, pausing as if he still couldn’t find the words to say what he had decided to say.

“You can say it tomorrow, Marco!” Star protested, tearing up a little. She didn’t want to hear it. She knew whatever the specific reason Marco was angry at her, no matter how valid, it would shatter her, and she needed to be whole right now, for his own good if nothing else. “Look, just let me make sure you come out of this thing alright. You can hate me all you like after we deal with this Princess White stuff, ok?”

“No! We can’t do that, because you got it all wrong! Please, just listen for a second.” He took a deep breath and crossed one leg atop another underneath his princess dress. “First of all, Star, I don’t hate you, and you didn’t hurt me. I am really sorry I caused you to think that was the case. Apparently even now I keep messing this stuff up! It is just, I didn’t know, or I don’t know, how to begin... I guess the first thing I should have said, actually, is that it’s me that needs to apologize. So, well: I am sorry, Star.”

“Wait, what?!” He was making no sense. What would Marco have to apologize for? “But then, why did you seem so angry earlier? About me not telling you about Tom?”

“Star, I already told you, I don’t give an opossums’ ass about Tom!” Marco shouted. “And, I was angry at myself, alright? At being so stupid! At ignoring the way my best friend felt! Why didn’t you tell me, Star? Why didn’t you tell me that I was making you miserable when I began dating Jackie?!”

“Uh?” Star thought back to their conversation earlier that same night. Had Marco ever truly said he was angry at her, or had she just assumed he was? Then again, he truly had nothing to apologize for, other than perhaps being a misleading idiot just now! “Marco, you were not making me miserable, ok? I was happy that you were dating Jackie, because it made you happy. And ok, so I was a bit jealous of her, and a bit worried that you didn’t like me the way you liked her. But well, surprise, you sort of did! It is pretty much the one thing Ruberiot got right with his stupid song: that story did have a happy ending! At least until earlier tonight...”

“I did like you! I do like you! It’s just, I am ashamed it took me so long to realize it, Star,” Marco blushed, and shifted her, his, ponytail, uncomfortably. Honestly, it was kind of adorable. “I am sorry if I hurt you by being so oblivious!”

“Marco, I was fooling even myself back then about how I felt, so of course I fooled you too!” she reasoned. “Anyways, suppose I had told you then, what would you have done? Dumped Jackie for me?”
Marco fell silent, and they stared at each other for what seemed like forever.

“I am such an asshole,” he said, simply.

Because he wouldn’t have? Or because he would? He didn’t say, and Star did not press him on that. For once, she managed to keep her own impulsiveness from making her do something she knew she would later regret.

“Marco, I know assholes, ok?” she grimaced, recalling a certain demon ex-boyfriend. “You really, really, aren’t one. And hopefully you don’t think I am one either...”

The Earth boy, St. O’s rebel princess, her bestie, got off his chair and walked towards Star. He was crying and smiling at once, and so was she. He extended his arms and was about to lean down towards the bed, when Star jumped to meet him.

“Hugs!” she cried.

Suddenly, things between them felt right again. He was her boyfriend, and her best friend. He cared about her so much that the thought of having made her miserable, even if it was basically by failing to read her mind, was the one thing that disturbed him the most about that entire gross messed-up song. Tom didn’t matter to him, and the reaction of the people of Mewnie didn’t matter to him, so why should those matter to Star? If it ever came to that, she would find a way to get the citizens of Mewni to accept Marco and her, and Jackie too, for that matter. Whether she had to bend tradition to do so, or re-invent it, they would find a way, together.

As they embraced, a flash of inspiration hit her. “Wait, I got it! You don’t really have to fight Princess White tomorrow!”

“I don’t?” Marco asked, visibly taken aback by the magical princess’ rapid change of tracks.

“No,” she reassured him. “I just remembered! From my lessons. Guess I wasn’t always asleep! Traditionally, under most kingdoms dueling standards, you can designate a proxy to fight for you. Which means... that I can take care of the problem for you!” She made a swift wand-shooting motion, with her non-wand hand just in case.

“Wait, Star, didn’t you say that was dangerous?” he reminded her.

Thing was, he wasn’t wrong. If the other princess’ weapon of choice was swords, then that banned magic wands, and what were the chances Snow White would chose wands? Well, if worse came to worst, she could dip down and blast her, with or without a wand. Then again, she reminded herself, doing that required a moment of concentration she might not get right in the middle of a fight. At any rate, Star was much more comfortable with it being dangerous for her, than for Marco.

“Oh, Marco, don’t worry, I can handle a little danger!” she put her best smile forward. She was not exactly the best princess to spot you in a formal duel, but Star was sure she would do much better than ‘Princess Marco’ could, no matter how cute he looked in a dress. Speaking of which, “For now, less worrying, more smooching!”

Star turned the two of them around and pushed her boyfriend onto the bed, climbing atop him as she pressed her lips, and her torso, firmly against his own. A growing bulge between the folds of his pink dress told the true princess that, at least as it pertained to her ‘no boys allowed’ plan, Princess White had already been foiled.

“Wait, Star, just for the record: I haven’t agreed. I am still fighting tomorrow!” he protested. “I got us into this whole mess, remember?”
“Oh, really?” Star grinned at him as she cocked her head. “Tell you what, Marco. You show me you can wrestle me here tonight, and I’ll consider letting you fight other princesses,” she joked. “Besides, I got us into this mess first!”

“Wrestle you, Star?” the karate boy raised an eyebrow. The mewman girl grabbed his wrists pushing him down, kissing him fiercely. The look in his eyes told her he got the idea. “Mmm, Star, not to rain on that particular parade, but I don’t think there is any connection between a formal duel and, well, this.”

“Well, I dunno Marco, they both involve some... ‘sword play’” she wiggled herself atop him suggestively and chuckled.

Marco groaned at her pun, but soon his groans became panting, and acquired a whole different meaning. Star herself felt her own excitement build up. There was something about the whole situation, and their respective costumes, that made her feel so, so, wicked. Tomorrow she would face Snow White, no matter what Marco said, but for now, she herself was going to be the bad princess.

“Star, wrestling doesn’t involve swords...” Marco remarked. Before the princess could finish thinking of a retort, mentioning how much of a spoilsport the ‘Safe Kid’ was being, she felt his arms slid from under her hands and grab her own wrists in return. With a quick movement, he flipped her over, and before she knew it the positions were reversed, “... it involves grappling moves.”

From his position straddling her, he bowed and placed his right fist on his left palm. Star was about to protest that that wasn’t wrestling either, but his lips quickly shut up her own. She felt his hands slid around her shoulders, removing the two suspender straps of her costume. He was doing something else with them. Something that Star couldn’t focus on, because his arms kept softly brushing against her mewberty wings, and his hips kept grinding on hers as both their skirts hiked higher and higher up. Soon she could feel his ‘sword’ poking her through only the fabric of their underwear.

A moment later, she remembered their playful competition, and moved to pounce Marco back on his back, reversing their positions. Except, it turns out she wasn’t able to do that. In fact, Star discovered, she couldn’t move her arms from behind her at all, even as Marco’s hands let go of them to concentrate on caressing her breasts through the black top of her costume. She gasped and moaned in pleasure, and it took her a second to realize what the boy had done just a moment before. Both her arms were tied against her back using her own suspenders.

“Hey, that’s playing dirty!” she shouted.

“It’s called strategy, Star,” he smiled at her, a smug Princess Marco smile. “So, do I win? Do I get to fight White tomorrow?”

“Sure, sure, Marco,” she groaned. Maybe she would regret giving in so easily later. But what could she do? If nothing else, Marco was resourceful, and if he wanted to fight, then who was she to stop him? She had told him once that she needed a friend, not a hero, perhaps that was true in reverse as well. “Just... well... continue what you were doing just now, alright?”

“Gladly,” Marco remarked.

Star didn’t know if it was just a matter of having significantly more practice, or if the Princess Marco persona made her bestie more confident, even in such a bizarre context, but he seemed so much more sure of himself than usual. She liked it. She liked it a lot. He was not being a cocky
asshole like Tom, or suave dancer-trance Marco, he was being her bestie, just, you know, bolder! He roamed his lips along her neck, suckling and kissing. He moved his hands along the edge of her wings, and dipped into her top to trace circles around her nipples.

Star felt herself getting hotter and hotter, and she could feel the boys own excitement without even needing to concentrate. She knew, through their mysterious link, that he found the idea of her being bound and vulnerable just as exciting as she found the idea of him being bold and in control. She could perceive that he indeed felt powerful in pink, and that he was reluctant to do away with either of their costumes. “Just push it aside,” she suggested.

He understood and did as she asked. A hand went in between their skirts, and pushed aside their underwear. Star felt Marco’s cock slide into her through the mess of fabrics and begin to move inside her. She felt an instinct to embrace him as he began fucking her rhythmically, but was quickly reminded of her immobility by the tight grasp of the leather straps around her wrists. Her brief struggle excited them both even more.

As he picked up pace, their sensations once again blended together. She could feel herself around him as much as himself inside of her, both perspectives becoming one and the same as he rode her towards climax. Realizing she could still move her legs, she lifted them to embrace his, pushing him deeper inside her. Her vision became a series of flashes, half from his perspective, half from hers. She could see both their panting sweating faces as the other saw them, hear their moans and grunts from either side.

A flash of green and she was Marco, feeling rebellious and in control, and at once more like a girl and more like a guy than he had ever felt before. A flash of green and she was Star, getting lost in the sensations, happy to be completely at the mercy of the one person she trusted the most in the whole world, excited to feel him inside her after having feared she would lose him. A flash of green and she was up in the air above the forest of certain death, flying at vertiginous speed towards the center of Mewni.

Before she could analyze that last scene, her mind went blank completely, as the powerful wave of both their orgasms hit her, not quite simultaneously this time, but in quick succession. She felt him pulsating and pumping into her even as she rode a long climax. All the muscles in her body tensed at once, and then became incredibly relaxed. Marco fell by her side and, summoning whatever strength he had left, he undid the knotted straps holding her arms in place. As soon as she could, she turned to hug him.

“Well, Marco, guess it was not the best idea to get you this tired the night before your big fight,” Star observed, conceding the point that started the whole wonderful struggle.

“I’ll be alright, Star. We are still like, what? Four hours away from dawn?! Oh, man...” Marco grimaced. “Well, Star, just promise me what we did just now won’t end up as a song,” he joked.

Star punched him in the arm. “No more songs! Not now, not ever!” she declared. “But, Marco, are you sure you are ok with, well, with all of that?”

“If you are ok with it, Star, then so I am,” Marco shrugged in response. “Although, if you have any other shocking revelations I should be aware of, now would be a great time to bring those up. You know, when there is not an entire kingdom for an audience...”

Star though back to their mysterious link, to the flashes she had just seen. Why had she seen Mewni, and the forest of certain death, of all places? She considered, for a second, to tell Marco about the visions. But that would require mentioning the All-Seeing Eye spell, and that was an explanation she still didn’t want to get into, not now, and hopefully not ever.
“What? Marco, don’t be silly! That was all of it, I swear it, all of the shocking revelations. No more secrets, I promise!” she blurted, after a while.

The boy in the pink dress arched an eyebrow at her, in clear disbelief. She forced a nervous smile.

“You know what, Star, never mind, I’ll learn them when I learn them. I guess that’s the thing about being your best friend, or your boyfriend, it is always going to be a surprise after another, and I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he smiled a relaxed smile at her. “Let’s sleep now. We have a fairytale dictator to overturn tomorrow.”

----

Tom looked up from the stash of envelopes on his hands, pausing to observe Janna’s focused movements. She sat on the floor of his room, in the lotus position, waving her arms in intricate patterns around the flickering ball of ghostly blue flames that floated in front of her.

She had her eyes closed.

Did that help her see them? The dead souls swarming around them, circling her sitting body as she drew from their power?

The demon prince was sure she could not see them with her eyes open. Humans, as a rule, could not. But, perhaps, she already could sense them in her mind eye. If not, she would likely soon learn to do so.

It wasn’t as if she was consuming souls to power her sorcery, of course. Not even close. The power required to permanently destroy a true soul was enormous, as was the arcane energy liberated in the process. But she was attracting them to her, and sipping away some of the remaining life-force of the long deceased, little by little spinning it into her phantasmal yarn of flames. It figures that the damned girl would have an affinity for the energies of the underworld, rather than those of her own dimension.

He brought his focus back to the letters, as he sat quietly on his sofa, wary of interrupting the apprentice witch. He had in front of him many bills (‘To: Tom Lucitor, One Lucitor Palace, #666’), petitions from mortals seeking favors from dark powers (‘To: His Grace, Tom Lucitor, Dark Prince Most Unhallowed’), and more junk mail that you could even imagine (‘To: Whomever it might reach’). To hell with advertisers! Actually no, that they were all down here was the problem in the first place.

“Tom, catch!” yelled Janna, as she let go of her fiery hex in his general direction, probably seeking to startle him.

The demon smiled a single-fanged smile, and caught the fireball in his hand with ease. He closed his fist around it, holding on to it. He then took a stack of letters with his other hand and slowly burned them into the flame, before extinguishing the blue orb with his palm.

“Cool,” he remarked evenly. “That’s some pretty good progress, Janna.”

“It is way too slow,” she retorted, unconvinced. “Come on, Tom, the other way is faster... and way more enjoyable!”

She gave him a seductive wink, and vulgarly roamed her hands around the curves of her small breasts. The demon prince raised an eyebrow in return.

“Janna, last time we got lucky,” no pun intended. “It was like being a lightning rod. The only
reason you didn’t hurt yourself is that you fired off the power as soon as you got it. I am pretty sure you don’t actually want to take a risk like that again.”

He sighed and directed his attention elsewhere, away from the teasing mortal. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a black envelope, labeled simply ‘To: Tom, From: Sam’. A familiar feeling of dread nested itself in the back of the demon prince’s skull. Despite the simple informal addressing, the letter was sealed in blood red wax, displaying the flaming blade and pentagram symbol that the young prince knew only too well.

“So,” Janna’s words took him out of his contemplation, “you are saying you are going to have me here for three days and not fuck me, Tom?” She mock-pouted.

“I said no such thing,” he grinned, devilishly. “It’s just that we might have to exercise a bit more self-control than that night. I am sure we will find ways to enjoy ourselves, without me going full agro every time,” he teased her back. “Speaking of which, I can’t believe your parents let you stay in here for three days! I mean it. I literally didn’t believe you when you told me they were ok with this, Janna.”

“Eh, fair enough. I told them I was going to be staying with Ingrid,” she shrugged. “Do you really care?”

“Lying is not nice, Janna,” he noted, with a sarcastic smirk.

He was neither surprised, nor disappointed, of course. The human girl was a rebel, and that’s probably a big part of why he enjoyed being with her. As soon as the thought was formed, he realized, to his annoyance, that it meant he had a type.

“Oh, right, like I have never lied to my parents before,” she chuckled. “Besides, what am I going to tell them? That I plan to spend the entire weekend in bed with the devil?”

The devil, eh? Tom’s eyes fell back into the black envelope.

It wasn’t just black. It was dark enough that it sucked in the light around it, permanently casting a bubble of shadows on itself even as he waved it closer to the candle flame. Chances were, it would not burn either, not to worldly fire. Knowing Sam, it was made of something like the darkness from the deepest depths of creation. Or maybe from a piece of the fabric of the firmament, taken before the first stars were placed there. Janna thought she was getting in bed with the devil by dating him. She didn’t know what the literal hell she was talking about.

“Tom, what’s that?” she startled him. In his contemplation, he didn’t realize when she had gotten up and walked towards him. Now she was looking right over his shoulder. “Letter from an old girlfriend?”

He scoffed at that. As far as he cared to count, his only ex-girlfriend proper was Star, and they weren’t exactly in speaking terms these days. He supposed there was one other person who might qualify, if he was using the term ‘girlfriend’ very loosely. One who could maybe send light-devouring black letters of her own. Between her and Sam, Tom was not sure who he preferred dealing with, to be honest. Of course, objectively speaking, the missive’s actual sender was by far the more dangerous of the two.

“From an old friend of the family. A party invitation, I think,” he added, waving his hand dismissively. It probably was. One that Tom planned to decline.

Blood Moon Balls were one thing, but Sam’s little soirees always turned out way more intense than
he found, well, *tolerable*, really.

---

Marco woke up to an intermittent knocking sound.

He slowly opened his groggy eyes to see an unfamiliar, yet sumptuous, bed canopy above him. The mattress felt incredibly soft, fine silk sheets too, and the room had just a hint of the perfume of pine-wood that rose up with the morning.

Oh, right, St. Olga’s!

Heinous might have been a horrible principal, but she was an *amazing* interior decorator.

Marco heard knocking once more, and tried to get up to answer the door. Unfortunately, something was pressing against his chin: Star’s... foot?

Man, he had expected to wake up to her embracing him, or maybe vice versa. Instead, she lay splayed all around him, snoring loudly as she hugged a pillow at the base of the bed. Her left foot was basically hitting him in the face, while the other leg had somehow monopolized the blanket away from *both* of them. He smiled. He should really have known better.

“Marco? Star?” he heard Jackie’s voice, accompanying another set of knocks. “You two decent?”

To his surprise, the knocks came from the opposite end of the room he would have expected, away from the door. He rushed up, adjusted his ponytail and his dress. Oh man, he could do with a shower right now. But never mind that! He hurried up to the window, opened the curtains, and flipped the lock. Jackie pushed the left panel open and slid in a swift parkour movement. Outside, the light of dawn was barely visible in the horizon, but a thick fog seemed to rise with the morning.

“Jackie, what are you doing out there?” Marco asked, surprised. “Wait! We are on a third floor! You could have hurt yourself!”

“Please, Marco,” Jackie snorted, “with the amount of ledges, gargoyles, and random protrusions this old place’s got, *Ferguson* could have climbed between the rooms, probably while carrying miss Skullnick or something,” she observed, playing it off.

“Oh, hey Jackie!” Star, suddenly wide awake and chirp as a morning dove, greeted the other girl. “But, um, if you could have gone out of your room through the window at any time, why not come here last night?”

Jackie leaned against the wall. “Well, it seemed like you had some stuff to work out on your own last night. I didn’t want to intrude,” she remarked. “By the looks of it, I’d said you did work it out?” She chuckled.

Marco blushed. Had Jackie heard them too? After all, if she had been right inside the next room...

Star and him hadn’t precisely been discreet. Then again, what if anyone else heard them? Was Princess Marco about to be outed to the princesses of St. O’s as a raging lesbian?

“Aww, Jackie. Yeah, we kind of did. Thanks!” Star’s voice interrupted Marco’s mental tangent. “Ok, anyhow, enough chit-chat, we have a tyrant to fight!”

“Oh, right,” Marco grumbled. He felt so tired after last night. It was one thing to discuss morning duels in the abstract, a different one to wake up at the crack of dawn to fight a psychopathic rebel
princess. Why did nobody ever schedule this damn things for mid-afternoon?

“I mean, if you are sure you are up for it, Marco?” Star asked, seeming to notice her best friend’s torpor. “If not, you know I can always tag in. Not that I don’t trust your fighting prowess if you still want to take White on yourself, though...”

“Wait,” Jackie asked, inquisitively, “you mean it doesn’t have to be Marco that fights her?”

“No,” Star responded proudly, “Under the fifth trans-dimensional code of chivalry and gallant conduct, on which Mewni’s own rules are based, any party to a trial by combat might designate a proxy, who may fight on their stead, if willing.” She recited, with surprising eloquence, given what Marco knew about her grades.

“Ok, then I’ll do it!” Jackie offered, almost excitedly.

“What? No!” Marco protested. No way he was going to let either of them fight his battles. “I mean, ok, I am a bit tired right now. But nothing that the adrenaline won’t solve. I have been in morning fights before at the dojo and...”

“Marco,” Jackie stopped him with a hand raised. “It is not just that I am the most well rested of the three of us, which I am. It is also that I want to do this. To take on the adventure head on, like you two do, not just being here for the ride, ok?”

“I am not sure, Jackie,” Star interjected. “Duels are pretty serious business. There is no way to back down once the fight starts, or get outside help without breaking the rules. And, besides, that Princess White seems pretty vicious. I think is better if you let me or Marco handle this one, and we can definitely spot you on a simpler first time adventure, like punching monsters, or maybe even a small hydra! You know, baby steps...”

“I see,” Jackie appeared to ponder. Marco knew that look. “So, Star, question: what kind of weapons are permitted in a duel?”

“Weeell,” the princess started, “the challenged party picks, usually, and that would be White in this case, I think. I am not sure.”

“Oh, and White was carrying a sword last night,” Jackie observed, logically, “Star, Marco, do either of you know how to fight with a sword?”

Marco groaned. Of course Jackie knew the answer already.

“Well, not very well,” Star conceded, “I can swing around a bunch of weapons, but I usually use my wand and, before I got it, I mostly punched stuff.”

“Well, I have four years of fencing lessons as a kid, and a couple of weeks as a refresher, Star,” Jackie noted. “Not going to say I am a master duelist, but out of the three of us, I am still our best sword fighter.”

“Jackie, fencing is not the same as dueling, and you are not as, well, resistant, as I would be,” Star remarked, apparently trying her best to be polite about the differences between human and mewman fortitude and constitution. “Unless... Wait! Jackie, this could actually work!”

“What could work?” Marco asked, worried about Star sudden swing towards the other girl’s case.

“Well, traditionally, the Queen of Mewnie would use the Royal Magic Wand to empower the kingdom’s soldiers,” she explained. “To fight against the evil monster hordes and stuff... except
they weren’t actually always evil, but that’s another story and well...

“Wait,” Jackie interrupted. “You mean the whole Mewnipendance Day stuff? The huge armor suits and weapons?”

“Yes!” Star shouted excitedly. “Except, I think I can make those way more discreet at this point. Unpierceable magic shield over your whole body, magically empowered strength and reflexes, enchanted sword,” she listed with her fingers. “You won’t be in any risk at all! White won’t know what hit her, and you get your first taste of ad-ven-ture! Ok, let’s do this Jackie!”

“I dunno, Star,” Jackie remarked, “isn’t that kinda cheating?”

“Not really,” Star retorted. “The rules are that I can’t intervene during the duel, and you can only bring a sword as weapon. Magic cast before duels is actually pretty common... I think.”

“Fair enough,” Jackie shrugged. “Ok, buff me up, Butterfly!”

“Wait a second!” Marco shouted, angrily. “I didn’t say I would let Jackie fight for me. The whole magic empowering stuff is fine by me, but I should be the one to fight!”

“Why?” Jackie asked, raising an eyebrow, and Marco knew he wasn’t winning this one either. But he had to try.

“Because she challenged me!”

“And you can pick a proxy, so pick me.”

“But I got us into this in the first place!”

“No, that would be Horse Head.”

“But I am the...”

“... guy?” Jackie completed his sentence. She, in her princely outfit, looked up and down at Princess Marco, her chin resting on a gloved hand. “Marco, first, that’s kinda sexist. Two, if that’s the standard, then all the more reason I should be the one defending the honor of my princess, no?”

Marco had no retort, none that could help him win the argument.

“Come on, dude,” Jackie smiled at him. “I can do this. I want to do this. I am the best suited one, and with Star’s magic it should be a piece of cake. Trust me, ok?”

----

A knock on her door woke up Queen Moon. Tiredly, she opened her eyes, noticing that no light of dawn filtered yet through the curtains. She rose to her feet, closed her nightgown and opened the door just enough to see who it was that woke her up at this time. “River, dear? Since when do you knock on your own room?”

“Well darling,” the king rubbed the back of his head nervously. “It’s just, well, it’s been a while since you two... I just thought I’d give you space for the night.”

Moon the Undaunted blushed at her husband’s comment, and at the recollections of the night before, which suddenly flooded her drowsy memory. Then, from behind her, came a yawn, followed by a chuckle. “Mightily appreciated, King River,” quipped Hekapoo, from inside the bed.
“Sorry, dear,” Moon apologized, “I know this is all terribly unfair to you...”

“Nonsense,” her husband cut her off. “Fair or unfair doesn’t come into it, I knew of you two back when I married you, and I am rather fond of old Hekapoo anyways. Besides, I relish a good night of independence!”

“I... I will make it up to you, River, I promise,” Moon said with a smile.

“You more than make it up, darling, just by being you,” the king commented.

“You two are truly a fountain of sap,” groaned the sorceress. “But, if you have waited till now, and I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, River, why not wait until the morning? Or maybe noon?”

“Actually,” the king coughed. “Moon, I am sorry to wake you but, it seems like you are required. The... well, the songstrel,” he nearly spat the word. “He says he needs to see you, and that is urgent. The chap seemed rather terrified too. I swear I didn’t even get to rough him up myself!”

Queen Moon simply nodded in acknowledgement. Moments later she was fully dressed and walking down the stairs beside her husband. At the bottom of those, in the Mewni royal throne room, were a dozen or so guards and a stunned, half-panicking, Ruberiot.

“Queen Moon! My queen! I came to warn you, there is a dark and terrible storm brewing over the entire kingdom!” he shouted, as soon as he saw her. Truly, he was the last of her subjects Moon Butterfly wished to speak with right now, specially after the night’s shameful performance!

“After that song of yours, it doesn’t surprise me people are in a bad mood,” she commented evenhandedly. Then, doing her best to conceal her boiling anger, letting only a hint of polite disapproval filter through, she added, “to tell the truth, I am not fully pleased with it myself, master songstrel.”

“No, my queen. You don’t understand,” Ruberiot shook his head and pointed terrified at the large balcony podium. “I am not being poetic. I mean a literal dark and terrible storm!”

“On June? In Mewni?” the queen asked puzzled, but directed her view out into the night all the same.

She saw indeed a starless sky, covered by dark thunderstorm clouds. The lightning that crisscrossed them, however, was of a most unnatural emerald color.

Before she could figure out an appropriate comment, a bright flash exploded at the center of the storm, and a green fiery meteor sprung forth from above the sky. It flew directly towards the royal palace, leaving an ominous hole on the clouds in its wake. Moon, well acquainted with the significance of certain magical phenomena, couldn’t help but notice that even the sky behind the clouds was empty of any of the usual celestial bodies of the night. “River, get my armor, and wake Hekapoo! Guards, sound the alarm!”

The meteor impacted the castle balcony, with surprisingly little effect for its size, other than a blinding viridescent flash and a splashing of emerald fire. The queen knew well enough not to mistake that for a good sign.

As Moon’s eyes adjusted to the sudden illumination, she thought she could see the outline of a woman’s body rise through the green flames that begun to burn on the balcony floor.

“Who is there? In the name of Moon the Undaunted, Queen of Mewni, identify yourself!” she shouted at the intruder.
The inhuman voice that came back through the glass window chilled her to the bone.

“I am love, all-conquering”

Chapter End Notes

The perfect Princess Moon
She's nice in every way
Always in a sunny mood
Even on the cloudy days

**Coming up next:** *Chapter 15: To Keep the Peace, We Will Play the Game*
*In which we finish our look into the past, present, and future, of Moon the Undaunted.*
To Keep the Peace, We Will Play the Game

Chapter Summary

In which we finish our look into the past, present, and future, of Moon the Undaunted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 15: To Keep the Peace, We Will Play the Game

To keep the peace, we will play the game
Royal secret from royal shame
- The Songstrell Ruberiot (original continuity)

"I will hunt down the remains of the monster army, and scatter them, without country or leadership," had spoken Moon the Undaunted. Moon the Lizard-vanquisher. Moon the Mighty Warrior Queen of Mewni. Moon the God-damned Fool!

Turns out that, unlike breaking The General’s siege in the first place, hunting down a disbanding army of various non-human monsters involved a lot less regal proclamations and brave last stands than one might imagine. What it did involve, however, were way too many months-long tracking expeditions through the most recondite wastelands that Mewni and the surrounding lands had to offer: scorching desert after damned scorching desert, barren tundra after miserable barren tundra, icky swamp after bloody icky swamp! They were lizards, for Selena’s sake! Of course they all went into hiding in swamps. No, not near swamps, or around swamps, in them! As in: inside the yucky leech-infested waters. And where they hid, Moon the Undaunted, Queen of Mewni, had to follow.

It was not like she could just send the royal knights, either, and use her time to focus on administering and rebuilding her kingdom. Even though she certainly had a better brain for that than half of the damned royal council. Her best friend, and ambiguous sweetheart, River, stayed on her behalf, as the queen’s chosen representative. He did so, even though he hated the bureaucracy as much as she welcomed it, and would have been much happier than her pursuing Toffee’s former goons across the land.

But, no, young Queen Moon had to go on every single hunt herself, which meant leaving someone she trusted behind. The lizards did not run from the knights of Mewni, and they certainly did not run from River Johansen, they ran from her! A seventeen year old awkward girl in ill fitting plate armor, who could barely drag around her two longswords, much less swing them at them with any degree of precision. But she had the magic wand, and she had the spell that could kill them permanently; the power which would break that which couldn’t be broken. Never mind that she did not plan to use Eclipsa’s dark powers ever again in her life. As long as the monsters didn’t know that, she could make them flee by her mere presence.

She had to admit that she sometimes enjoyed her newly found reputation as a powerful warrior and no-nonsense queen. She certainly liked that more than the ‘perfect little princess’ facade she had been forced to take on all those years prior. But either was as much a fiction as the other and, in the
end, the only thing she was, behind it all, was Moon. Not Queen Moon of Mewni. Not Moon the Undaunted. Just, you know, Moon.

Right now, back at her castle after five weeks out in the wilderness, just-Moon needed a bath.

“Oh, My Queen, welcome back,” a mischievous voice greeted her from the ledge of a balcony, as she climbed the stairway up the tower to her royal bed, and bath, chambers. The inter-dimensional sorceress looked at her with both overt mockery and genuine delight to see her back.

“Hekapoo,” Moon replied evenly. “I suppose I could say the same. Didn’t know you were in Mewni.”

“Well, you know, My Queen...” She stressed and dragged out the title to the point of ridicule, never mind the fact that Hekapoo was one of the few people in Moon’s life who were most definitely not among her subjects. She had been doing that ever since Moon defeated Toffee, way over two years ago now. Then again, they didn’t cross paths so often after that. They were both rather busy people these days. “I have had my own pest control problems to deal with, dimension hopping abominations and the like. Very dull stuff. How goes, well, doing your job? I heard you are, how shall I put it? ...literally swamped with work.”

Moon suppressed the urge to groan.

“It goes: tiring, wet, and rather stinky,” the mewman counted with her fingers. “So, while I am glad you are deigning to honor us with your always charming presence and sense of wit, Hekapoo, I do really have to take a shower now.”

“Of course, My Queen,” the council member bowed, way too deeply for it to be sincere. “Let me know if you need any, well, assistance.”

“Assistance with what?” she responded without thinking. “Showering?”

She suddenly realized what she was saying, and felt the embarrassment creep up to her cheeks. She hoped the mud and dirt in her face would conceal her blush. What the hell had she just said? She looked at Hekapoo, who shrugged. Wait, had the sorceress actually been proposing, no... no way! It couldn’t be.

Moon had to admit that she enjoyed her rare verbal sparring with the Forger of Scissors more than a little. She liked River, a lot, no change on that count. But one of the things that had made him stand out, was that he believed in her when no one else would. Now they all believed in her, and Hekapoo was the one who challenged her, when no one else dared. The one person undaunted by Moon the Undaunted. The only one, well, other than Moon herself, secretly poking fun at the fiction of the great warrior queen.

Hekapoo was also the one person that could respect her royal magic, but also understand its limits. Alright, the only person that wasn’t her great-great-great-grandma encased in ice, a literal wizened old goat, a giant cosmic entity taking calls through a crystal ball, or a magical elf living inside a book. None of them counted. Not, you know, in that way. In the way in which Hekapoo’s hips moved and drew Moon’s furtive eyes to the sorceress backside every time she left the room. The way she licked her lips, and the edge of her small fangs, with slow expert motions. The way in which her smile promised wicked things to the young queen if she only ever took her up on her ever more blatant innuendos.

Dammit, Moon had thought not being able to decide between war and peace, or between which boy she liked, was hard enough. Now it turned out that winning the war was so much easier than
maintaining the peace, and she didn’t even know if she liked boys or girls in the first place!

“Well, My Queen, as your humble advisor, I am glad to offer my assistance, with whatever you might desire…” Hekapoo finally replied, after letting her bright yellow eyes linger over the monarch body for a while, as she considered the question.

Moon swallowed, hard.

The sorceress had been teasing her for a while, or so she had thought, never quite certain if it was only her own overactive imagination. There was no mistaking this offer, though. It was a straight line if she’d ever heard one. The older woman was literally offering to join the young queen in the shower!

“Eh... I... I mean...” she stammered. “Look, Hekapoo, I... you are... it’s not that I don’t... Sorry! Going to shower now. Talk to you later!”

Young queen Moon raced up the stairs, leaving behind an unsurprised, even grinning, Hekapoo. She ran to her room, through the back door of her bedchamber, into the royal bath. Moments later she was alone, laying inside the tub, letting the hot water embrace her, reminding her of the heat that the fiery sorceress herself radiated, and feeling... quite daunted.

----

“I am love, all-conquering”

The words were clearly nonsense, but the cold eldritch tone with which the emerald apparition spoke them rendered them a clear threat. Moon closed her eyes for just an instant, taking a moment to collect all that she was: queen, mother, warrior, mage, wife, lover, protector. She dipped down and summoned the magic around her into a powerful shielding bubble.

Not a moment too soon. The being from the meteor raised a diaphanous hand, and the sound of thunder followed. The closed glass doors that led to the ceremonial balcony shattered into a million pieces, each becoming a fast and deadly projectile, flung towards her, the songstrel, and her royal guards. The barrier spell held back the shards, protecting Moon and her subjects. All around them, tapestries, furniture, and even the stone walls themselves were ravaged by the ferocious crystal hailstorm.

The green fiery body floated in, slowly gliding behind the glass barrage. As it left the conflagration outside, its outline became more and more clear. It was made entirely of ghostly green flames, with two obvious exceptions: its head was an ornate silver mask fixed in an unsettlingly calm rictus, and its arms ended in two silvery gauntlets of similarly intricate design.

With reflexes honed through a lifetime of experience, Moon moved to counterattack. She raised her left hand and five rays of bright blue light emerged, one from each of her fingers, crisscrossing in mid air and taking separate paths to converge on the creature’s position, giving it no way to escape or avoid the hit. They all connected. A deafening brassy sound ringed inside Moon’s head, and a sharp jolt of pain shot through her arm. It fell, numb and useless, to her side.

Moon had experienced magic resonance before, but never like this. Whatever the being was, it was not just magical in nature, it was made of magic itself. Worse than that, it was magical energy so antithetical to her own, that a direct hit with her spells resulted in catastrophic levels of backslash. Which meant... “Oh, no!”

The creature pointed at the glimmering blue bubble shield around her and the mewman soldiers.
Suddenly, a green tint began spreading through the spell. A second later, the bubble popped. No, not popped. It exploded. It threw the queen of Mewni back a dozen paces, slamming her against the throne room’s back wall. She felt dizzy and disoriented.

“Protect the queen!” the guards shouted. They charged at the apparition, while Ruberiot ran for cover under a chair.

They fought valiantly, and briefly, and so regrettably pointlessly. They never stood a chance. Some managed to hit the assailant with their weapons, while it reached out to gently tap the rest with the fingers of its gloves. In both cases, the final effect was exactly the same: the merest contact between them and the apparition sent each knight flying through the air with a blinding flash. They convulsed for a while after hitting the ground, as if struck by a lightning. Whether they were in agony then, or dead before they even landed, was anyone’s guess. What was certain is that, once the spasms stopped, the brave men would never move again.

“W... what do you want?” Moon asked.

The creature turned its expressionless mask towards her. Then, by way of a response, it raised a silvery hand and pointed it at her chest. Arcs of green arcane power begun discharging all around in the magically saturated air. Moon closed her eyes, and tried desperately to summon all that she was once more, hoping against hope it would be enough.

----

“You summoned me, My Queen,” the fiery sorceress asked sardonically, as she walked into the Mewni council room.

At the end of the table, Moon sat regally. She wore her battle armor, clean and shiny this time around. No swords to be seen. Her wand, the true symbol of her power, laid in front of her on the table. As Hekapoo arrived, the young monarch made a show of moving the wand from her left to her right side, as if re-arranging a piece of tableware.

“Yes, Hekapoo,” Moon spoke, in full formal register. “I’d like to,” she paused, “conduct negotiations.”

“Negotiations? In the middle of the night?” Hekapoo pointed out to the starlit sky through the window, then at the empty seats through the council table. What was the kid’s game. Whatever it was, it was rather unusual of her, which made it all the more tempting for her to play along. “Between Mewni and who? I don’t really do ruling stuff, and you know I can’t speak for the high commission on my own. So, who am I representing, then?”

“Youself,” the beautiful royal brat declared. “And I shall represent primarily my own interest, not that of Mewni,” she clarified. “So, Hekapoo, I’d like you to elaborate as to the nature of the offer you made to me two months ago?”

The sorceress racked her brain to figure out whatever the young queen might be referencing. Two months was a long while, particularly if you spent over a hundred years of it on a dimension where time simply ran differently. But Hekapoo had impeccable memory, and, to be absolutely truthful, she had been thinking about the Queen of Mewni far more than she did about most people, during that vast time.

“Oh!” she recalled, with a grin. So that was what this was about? This should prove rather amusing. “I offered to help her royal highness take a bath, if I recall correctly.”
“Funny thing that,” Moon spoke. Her tone was haughty and controlled, but Hekapoo could see her trembling ever so slightly. It made her own spine shiver in anticipation. “I recall water is not generally to your liking, Hekapoo. So, why would you propose such a thing?”

“Simple, My Queen,” she dragged her tongue over the uttered title, as she finally took a seat, right atop the table, on the side opposite of Moon. “It is the other factor in that scenario that would be to my liking.”

“Myself,” Moon stated, plainly, then raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

Hekapoo dragged a hand over the mahogany wood, pushing aside maps and notes, causing them to fall to the floor. “There are only a few people, of the vast many I meet in my line of work, whom I find, well... interesting. Lately, that includes you. My. Queen.” She fixed her own eyes on those of the monarch of Mewni.

It was no lie, there were only so many mortals that the Forger of Scissors didn’t come to find absolutely lame, or downright soporific, after mere minutes of interaction. When such a rare person presented himself or herself, it couldn’t but pique her interest. It had been literally millennia, in her own subjective time, since she had met someone quite like Moon: at once so innocent and so strong, hard to predict, indomitable. *Undaunted* they called her and, however much she made fun of it, she had to agree the title fit.

“Shall I assume, from this little ambush of yours, that you find me interesting as well?” the sorceress asked, taking the offensive.

“What if I do?” was Moon’s whole response.

“What if I do?” was Moon’s whole response.

“Then my offer... remains quite open,” Hekapoo stated, running a finger through her own leg.

“As I said,” the younger woman responded, in a surprisingly controlled tone. “We are conducting negotiations. I would hardly be a wise ruler if I agreed to an offer I didn’t understand, would I? What exactly are you proposing?”

The sorceress was confused. As far as she was concerned, she was being exceedingly clear.

“Let me cut to the chase, Hekapoo,” Moon interrupted her thoughts. “I am interested. Curious might be the better description. But there is another one I am interested in as well. He and I are not betrothed, and we don’t owe each other anything right now. But, longer term, I think it is only natural that I pick him, if he would have me. If I take you on your offer, Hekapoo, then I can’t promise you I will be with you long term, and I can’t even promise you I will acknowledge it to the outside world. As a queen, I have to do what’s right for Mewni. That also means, that if this would in any way disturb my relations with the Magic High Commission, in a professional capacity, then I must decline...”

Hekapoo laughed raucously, almost rolling on the table at Moon’s long monologue. So that was her concern? That was what troubled Queen Moon the Undaunted about her little offer? As the Forger of Scissors began punching the table in a fit of hysterics, Moon seemed shocked, almost offended. It had probably taken her a good long while to come up with that little speech in her head. She was sweet, and naive, and oh so young and tender. Hekapoo felt herself blush. Doing her best to keep a good thing going, she forced herself to calm down from her guffawing.

“Moon, I have been around longer than you can possibly conceive,” she explained. “You would not be able to promise me the ‘long term’ even if you gave me your whole life, and, more to the point, I am definitely not asking you to do so! You have your one - the Johansen boy, right? - I have a
half-dozen right now, give or take, across as many dimensions. And I assure you, I can be professional when needed too. You are not even the first Queen of Mewni I have had this dance with. Can you handle that?"

“I can,” she replied simply, and the sorceress believed her easily, despite her young age. “How about my last request? This is between the two of us, no one else must know.”

Hekapoo wasn’t quite sure why that would be such a big deal. Then again, the internal affairs of Mewnian politics were, more often than not, too tedious for her to inform herself on them any more than was absolutely necessary. “Sure, whatever.”

“Then,” Moon smiled, with transparently forced confidence, “I believe we have reached acceptable terms.”

The sorceress licked her lips, and lazily stretched herself over the table, closing the distance between herself and the Butterfly child (and she’d be a child to her, even if she were a hundred rather than just seventeen). As she did, the forger leaned forward, showing the goods to Moon, through the low cut of her dress.

“So... ehm... now what?” the queen spoke, suddenly sounding very unsure. So much power, so much control, and yet so inexperienced. Deflowering her was going to be the most fun thing she did in ages, Hekapoo thought to herself.

“Now you shut up, Your Majesty,” she replied, “and you let me give you what you bargained so hard for.”

She leaned forward and kissed the queen’s closed lips, enjoying the way she tensed in nervous anticipation. Hekapoo inhaled the scent of the young ruler. Apparently the song was right, she did smell of lavender. But she also smelled of sweat, and determination, and over two years of pent up desire. Moon Butterfly slowly opened her lips to receive Hekapoo’s proving tongue. Soon after surrendering, she was meeting it hungrily with her own.

The forger ran a hand slowly up the length of the queen’s arm. It was indeed silky soft as well. Despite the heat she knew her own skin radiated, her touch seemed to leave gossebumps wherever it trod. Her pointy ears could hear the beating of the girl’s heart, still so pure, and yet so eager.

As their first kiss ended, they each removed other’s crown.

Carefully, Hekapoo began removing the other girl’s loose-fitting armor, piece by piece. It was harder work than most any garment, and even the sorceress could not easily break it apart, had she tried, for the armor was of course magical in nature. It frustrated her at every step, increasing her own sense of urgency. For a second she wondered if Moon had planned it so. But it couldn’t be so. The young queen was too inexperienced in these matters to plan a trick like that. Wasn’t she?

Moon ran her fingers through Hekapoo’s long hair, carefully avoiding the crackling flame, as the forger worked to unburden the queen of her steel breastplate. Eventually, she succeeded, revealing a blue cotton blouse. It rose up, just barely, with the shape of the ruler’s small breasts. She ran two white hands over them, savoring the tiny gasp which that action elicited from the mewman sovereign.

“Anyone played with them before?” the forger quipped. “Other than yourself?” she teased.

“None of your, ah, business, H-poo,” Moon retorted.

The sorceress simply took the opportunity to sneak her hands under the blouse, to tease them
directly, with soft calculated pinches. However, as she began to lift the fabric, the queen interrupted her, “Wait, I want to see yours first...”

“As you command, My Queen,” Hekapoo quipped, and gladly pulled down her top, letting her, quite significant, if she could say so herself, assets, out into the night air. To her surprise, Moon moved quickly, and soon she felt the mewman’s lips close around her left breast. She suckled like a babe, with hungry abandon, and it did things for Hekapoo she didn’t think anything did for her anymore. The young queen alternated circling with her tongue and literally sucking on them, and she eventually begun switching from one breast to the other. What she lacked in technique she more than made up in enthusiasm. It also didn’t hurt that the Forger of Scissors found the whole situation unbelievably erotic.

“Queen Moon,” she eventually interrupted her new lover, “lie on the table.” she commanded.

The most powerful woman in all of Mewnie did exactly as she asked.

It took agonizing minutes to remove the lower half of the royal battle armor but, after some effort, Hekapoo had her price. She ran her hands along the length of the queen’s legs, once and again, making her whimper, then she ran her tongue over the same path.

“Hekapoo, please,” Moon begged. The vulnerable yet desirous tone almost sent the older woman over the edge from just the sound of it.

“Please what, My Queen?” she teased her one final time.

“Please... lick me... you know, there,” the mewman whimpered as she parted her legs. The armor in her words and actions as discarded as that which used to cover her body.

“As you command, My Queen,” Hekapoo replied.

She kissed Moon’s other lips and rolled her tongue over the sides and length of her opening. Gently at first, she drew the girl’s arousal, until the always composed Moon was thrashing around, yelping softly as she bit her own hand, and pushing herself pleadingly onto the sorceress face. When it seemed like the mewman couldn’t take more of her slow torture, she began picking up the pace, running her tongue in circles around the mewman’s most private nub, gently sucking into it. She settled into a much faster rhythm soon, and then stayed there, as the queen of Mewnie trembled and broke into loud lustful moans. Her hands grasped at the important papers in the table and crumpled them beyond recognition, her legs flailed and kicked down a globe and her own royal wand. She came violently, sweetly, and gloriously, under the forger’s careful ministrations.

Another day, not far from that one in fact, and many more times after that, the young queen would repay the favor. But, for now, the fiery woman was quite content with this conclusion. She had finally gotten through all the walls of Moon the Undaunted.

“Ah... ah...,” Moon breathed heavily. She was almost as red as the sorceress hair. “You don’t think... do you think... anyone heard that?”

“Probably,” Hekapoo replied. “But hey, I kept my end of the bargain. I was discreet. Not my problem if you were not... My Queen.”

----

“Moon!” Hekapoo shouted horrified as her portal opened right in the middle of Mewni’s throne room.
She spotted the queen immediately. She was laying on the floor, her eyes closed. The powerful mewman looked resigned and defeated, as a humanoid shape made of emerald blazes raised a hand ominously towards her prone body. The sorceress felt, more than saw, the devastating magical force building up within the apparition. No way to reach Moon in time, no way to block the attack even if she did, none except...

With swift movements, Hekapoo broke her own dimensional scissors into two separate blades, and with each half she cut a distinct portal through the fabric of space: one to her left and one to her right, facing each other. The far end of the first portal opened between Moon and her opponent, whereas the second portal connected only with the dark void between the stars, in some dimension far away from this. Once both portals were open, Hekapoo jumped back.

It was not a second too soon.

A huge blast of green flames emerged from the appendage of the woman-shaped conflagration. It was caught, just in time, by the far end of her first portal, the one which the sorceress had placed between the creature and Moon. The blast then emerged in the left side of the two consecutive openings that lay before the Forger of Scissors. The flames flew straight into the right-side portal, disappearing through it, flowing harmlessly into the void. And yet, Hekapoo could sense a tremor as the magics passed through her chained gateways, as if reality itself shook as the malignant spell was forced through its walls.

An expressionless silver mask turned towards her, and, fortunately, away from Moon. The abomination then began floating, slowly, in her direction.

“That’s right, come at me, you big nasty candle!” It was something someone had once said to her, but, the sorceress felt, it applied even more so to this monstrosity.

All around herself, she began summoning her clones, until a veritable army stood ready to oppose the deadly intruder. They lunged forward as one, for that was what they were. Each of them wielded the divided scissors, as if they were a pair of daggers.

She wasn’t sure if any normal blade, or any lesser spell, could even hurt the fiery being. The scissors, however, would not only cut their target’s body, but also the space itself underneath it. If need be, the Hekapoos would rip the very fabric of the dimension to shreds, right from under this phantasm’s flaming form. They would do that and more to protect Moon. Her friend. Her lover. Her queen.

The damned thing avoided every hit. Moving as fast as lightning itself - perhaps literally so, for it was a being of light and flame - it avoided each and every one of her cuts.

Where she missed, where the blades hit the empty air, miniature portals to nowhere would open up. The sorceress would then close them with her mind, her next strike fast enough that no mewman eye could keep track of the portals forming and disappearing in the wake of her weapons.

Her many clones slashed at the very foundations of space from every direction and every angle. Yet not a single one of them caught the incorporeal being. In the back of her mind, the sorceress imagined she could hear a laugh, as the expressionless mask stared back at her in contempt.

Hekapoo felt a pair of metallic fingers against her chest. The light physical impact was followed by an overwhelming magical current.

It consumed her body, burning her insides to ashes, and extinguishing the flame that was her life. She felt herself die, again and again, as the creature popped her clones like soap bubbles.
The agony of a dozen excruciatingly painful deaths was enough to paralyze her remaining selves, to cloud her thoughts, to make her unable to coordinate her one-woman assault force. Twice a dozen Hekapoos fell to the ground in unbearable agony.

----

“Thank you, Lekmet, Romulus, for your eloquent words. Mewni will of course support the Magic High Commission’s edict on this matter,” Moon proclaimed, with a nod.

It had been almost four years since she assumed the throne of Mewni, almost four years since she fought Toffee and became Moon the Undaunted. In that time, she had grown to be respected not only as a military leader, but also as one of the most competent administrators the kingdom had ever seen. Under her reign, Mewnie had grown more prosperous than it had been in over a century, at least for the mewmans, if not for the monsters. Slowly, she had gained the respect of all members of the high commission as well.

“Hekapoo, may we speak in private?” Moon asked, as the members of the commission begun making motions to leave.

“Of course, Queen Moon,” the sorceress replied, with a polite business-like nod. But, as soon as the last of their peers was out of sight, her expression turned into a knowing smirk. “Or should I say, My Queen?”

“Hekapoo... I am afraid we do have to talk, for real this time,” the mewman continued, somberly. She avoided the other woman’s eyes, knowing that, if she saw them, she might not be able to continue. Instead, she looked out through the window.

“Really?” the sorceress asked, teasingly. “We do? I thought you just wanted to recreate our first time, Moon. Do you remember? It was right here.”

The forger ran a finger suggestively through the surface of the council room’s table. In the last two years, the two had met occasionally, as their incredibly demanding lives allowed. They had joined one another in the queen’s chambers, out in the forest, across dimensions, and even in the long promised royal bath. They had never once revisited this room, except for official business. Yet, for many months after their first encounter, Moon always felt a perverse pleasure during long and boring debates around this table, recalling the much more exciting activities it had once witnessed.

“Hekapoo,” the queen spoke in a quiet, tentative tone, one she rarely ever used anymore. She had become used to being sure about so much, yet now was so terribly unsure. Not of her decision, but of its consequences, and her own ability to follow through with them. “I am marrying River before the summer solstice.”

The sorceress blinked, and she looked perplexed for a second, hurt even. But in a moment that face was replaced by a soft smile, one Moon rarely saw in the forger’s face. Not her usual smirk, and not the fake polite smile of the full officer of the Magic High Commission, but a genuine, if bittersweet, smile.

“He is an excellent choice, Moon,” Hekapoo agreed. “He will be a good husband for you, and a good king for Mewni.”

“Yes, thank you,” Moon agreed. “But, well, you realize this means we can’t continue... you know?”

“Yeah, no big deal, a brief fling for me, either way,” the sorceress replied, but the queen could
notice the slight tremor in her arm. “Did he know, though?”

“Yes,” the mewman added, “he’s known for a long time now.”

“And I assume he asked for us to stop?!” Hekapoo sounded irritated, like she considered it rude for River to demand his own future wife to be loyal to him.

“No, Hekapoo, he didn’t... but, I need to do what’s good for the kingdom, and what’s fair to him,” Moon retorted. “It is my decision, not his. For what is worth, I am sorry...”

“Do you love him?”

“As much as I have ever loved anyone in my life,” Moon admitted, truthfully. But she kept to herself the rest of her thought: ‘just as much as I love you’.

---

Moon saw the bodies of her lover and friend collapse to the floor. The sight was enough to pull her back into her senses, and then a familiar voice drew her back into the fray.

“Darling, catch!” shouted River, as he threw her two swords at her, and ran down the stairs, unsheathing his own weapon. She knew he was not prepared for this fight, just as well as she knew she could never dissuade him from fighting alongside her.

Moon closed her eyes, and dipped down into her own being, summoning forth all her will to protect them all: her husband, her lover, her subjects. Radiant butterfly wings and four extra arms sprouted from her torso. She caught both the swords with the upper pair. The middle arm on her left side, however, still dangled down, immobile.

Fully transformed, she flew into the deadly circle in front of her, eyes narrowing in determination as she saw the abomination execute Hekapoo’s motionless copies, one by one, with cold precise motions. She struck at the torso of the being with one of the Royal Vorpal Swords of Mewni. It passed through the jade-colored flames harmlessly. At least, Moon observed, the magic of the swords didn’t seem to produce the same backslash as her own. On the other hand, the creature seemed to not even notice the hit, or herself, as it focused on exterminating the sorceress’ avatars.

Determined to interrupt the massacre before it was too late, the queen pulled back into the air, and then, with all her strength, she charged downwards from the sky, pointing the tip of her right-hand sword towards the back of the silver mask. It was fortunately corporeal, and metal impacted metal with a deafening sound. But while the mask showed no dent from the hit, Moon’s precious magical sword broke like glass. Pieces of steel flew all around them.

The mewman had managed to distract the phantasm, however, as the silvery face turned expressionless to face in her direction. Taking advantage of the distraction, ten Hekapoo clones rose back to their feet and lunged forwards at the same time towards the apparition.

“Moon!” she heard a cry echoed tenfold. “I know what she is! We need to get Star’s wand! I should have realized before, whatever you do, don’t...”

The being raised a single hand up into the sky, and an explosion of singular potency discharged into every direction. Moon was flung through the air once more, impacting into the ceiling. River, his valiant charge interrupted, was pushed away into the corner of the room, left unconscious by the strength of the blow. Hekapoos hit the walls all around the throne room, all but one vanishing on impact.
The fiery creature turned towards the one remaining Hekapoo, and began gliding leisurely in its direction. No! No way Moon would let this happen. She would not let her lover die before her very eyes. She would not let anyone else die. She was Moon the Undaunted! Moon the Lizard-vanquisher! Moon the Mighty Warrior Queen of Mewni! She claimed those titles and more, with all the might they might confer, and all the weight of their obligations!

She closed her eyes once more and pulled all her six hands together. Even her broken arm responded to her commands, such was the strength of her will. She dipped down into herself, deeper than ever before, and summoned all she was, perhaps all she could ever be. Her hopes and her fears. Her anger and her love. The darkness from deepest depths. The light from highest heights. Magical resonance be damned.

A ball of blue power, bright like the midday sun, burned in her hands, and from it extended forth a beam of pure magical power. A personal conjuration, wordless and nameless. The brightest spell of Moon the Undaunted!

The being turned once again to face her. From the flames emerged two other pairs of glove-less fiery arms. Six to match Moon’s own. It mirrored the queen’s gesture, and a ball of blackness, darker than the starless sky, emerged between its hands. A dark beam, contrasted by green fire, rose to meet Moon’s spell.

“Moon, no!!” she heard Hekapoo cry out.

Darkness and light collided, and a sound like the firing of a colossal cannon resounded through all the vastness of Mewni. Magical resonance like this world had never before seen reverberated through the air, before converging back onto Moon, and onto the emerald being. She felt as if her flesh was melting. Moon shed a last tear of regret, as her last thought went not to Hekapoo, or to River, but to her daughter, to Star, to a thought she had before she even met her.

And then there was only darkness.

----

Hekapoo felt the queen’s hand lazily drift across the back of her hair. Her other self, the one behind Moon, hugged her tightly in response. They were all naked in the royal bed, naked and spent. The mewman lied nested between the two clones, embracing one and being embraced by the other, while the sorceress enjoyed being at once the little and the big spoon.

“You know, Hekapoo, River and I are trying for a child,” Moon stated, matter-of-factly.

King River, bless his soul, had suddenly remembered that he had an important hunt to lead, deep within the Forest of Certain Death, for an elusive creature that came out only at night, exactly the one day the Forger of Scissors was around. Honestly, Moon had to be commended on her decision, for that if nothing else. It wasn’t even that she and the queen’s husband got along all that well. But, apparently the king was glad to get out of the way if being with the sorceress made his wife happy. In fact, she suspected, it had probably been River that pushed Moon to go back on her previous decision to end things with her, less than a year after their marriage. Hekapoo had to say, to her own credit, that she had given it her best effort to make the man’s wife very happy indeed.

“Well, glad to know you two are having fun,” she quipped. Moon laughed. It was so rare for her to laugh these days.

“We are,” Moon retorted. “Jealous?”
“Heh, pu-leeze, don’t make me laugh,” Hekapoo ran a finger along the mewman’s back. “Should I tell you about this fighter I met on the arena of the underworld pits? He fought with a wooden twig and wouldn’t even kill. He had muscles in places even I haven’t seen before. Or about this guildmaster, lord of a far off land, with rituals that do things to you you can’t even imagine? Or the gruff human colonel, deployed for years away from his wife? Or the hot blooded monster-slayer, fierce warrior princess of hidden depths? Or the dimensional priestess, sworn by sacred vows to chastity? Or the she-pirate, with the steel sharp wit and a tongue like the tide? “

“Alright, Hekapoo, I get the idea. But, well, do you tell them tales of the magical queen in the far away kingdom?” Moon asked, rather undaunted by the sorceress bragging.

“No once,” she grinned. “Because, as I remember, she swore me into silence.”

Moon chuckled at that, but then went serious. She remained silent for a long while, and Hekapoo knew her well enough to know it had nothing to do with their discussion so far, or her own many affairs.

“You know,” the queen’s tone turned dark all of a sudden, “I am scared.”

“Scared?” Hekapoo asked curiously. “Of childbirth? You? My fierce queen undaunted?” she teased. But she turned the version of herself in front of Moon back to look at her directly, to embrace her from both sides.

“Ha! No, not the birth!” Moon rolled her eyes. “No. It’s what comes after that worries me. Can I raise a kid? I try to be a good queen, I am not sure I can be a good wife... but, I do wonder, can I ever be a good mother?”

“Are you asking me? You must truly be worried, then!” The Forger of Scissors had never been a mother, not once in endless centuries. She was ill suited to be the caring type. “Well, for what is worth, I am sure River will be a dotting father. And I know you can do anything you set your mind to... My Queen.”

“Hekapoo, Toffee is still out there...” Moon closed her eyes, her voice sounded distant. “What if something happens? What if I can’t be there, to be a mother, good or bad. I don’t want my kid to have to go through what I went through...”

Tears begun falling down the queen’s cheeks. Tears long repressed, the scars left behind the queenly mask. The fire sorceress hugged her lover tightly, from all sides.

“Moon, it won’t be like that,” Hekapoo reassured her. “Even if there were a monster in this dumb dimension capable of besting you, he would first have to go through me!”

----

Butterfly Castle was built by ancient magics, cast by powerful queens of old. That was perhaps the only reason the place hadn’t just been leveled to the ground by the clash between light and darkness it had just witnessed. Even so, cracks ran across all walls, floor, and ceiling of the royal throne room. Green flames crackled all around, burning ancient and priceless tapestries. Precious vitrals had been smashed to dust.

None of that was worth a damn, however. Not now that the one truly precious thing this place had ever held laid demolished on the ground: six motionless arms and two lifeless eyes, not even the movement of her breathing to be seen. Moon. Her precious Moon. Even if she lived to see the death of the whole multiverse, Hekapoo knew, she would never meet someone like her, not among a
million lovers in a million far away lands.

In the middle of the room, offensive by its mere presence, stood a six armed body of emerald flames. It regarded the sorceress with a silvery visage of indolently rigid metal.


Her flame became a blazing bonfire atop of her. Her hair flew into a spiral, twisting violently in the air, as if lifted by a tornado only she herself felt. There was only one of her left, but one was enough once all restrain had been abandoned.

With her left blade, Hekapoo cut a portal, the far end opening right behind her foe. She pushed the same blade through the vortex it itself had created, and opened yet another portal, its destination far from here. She was counting on her foe not to realize what she was doing until it was too late, to not step away from inside the straight line segment created between her and that portal behind it.

Simultaneously, with her right blade, the sorceress cut a third portal directly in front of herself, facing away from her and towards her enemy. The other side of this portal opened to the bottom of an ocean deeper than any found on Earth or Mewni. Water sprung forth from it immediately, pushed to incredible velocity by thousands of atmospheres of pressure on the other end. The blasting stream hit the creature of flame and lightning. It pushed it into the portal Hekapoo had placed on the other side of its damnable form.

Hekapoo tore a fourth hole into the fabric of this dimension to follow in pursuit, and then closed all four portals behind her with a gesture.

The point had been to move them both away from Butterfly Castle. She did not dare devastate Mewni with what she needed to do. Honestly, she would barely have cared, except that it had been precious to Moon.

Instead, the place she had chosen to be the abomination’s tomb was an empty dimension, pure whiteness as far as the eye could see, in every direction of the map. It had up and it had down, it had something that passed for ground - a blank ice-like solid-white expanse that formed an unending floor - but little else.

The green burning cosmic shit-stain stood up unharmed, unconcerned. With but a gesture, it instantaneously turned the pooled water around it into vapor.

Meanwhile, Hekapoo had begun to open up portals to the most inhospitable worlds of which she knew. Bursts of acid, hails of snow, burning lava, and a menagerie of infernal beasts, all came out of the many doors she cut into the walls of this formerly empty dimension. Yet the horror with the silver face resisted all assaults. It stood there, impavid, taking all of her anger in silent mockery.

“Well, have it your way, you undeserving dimensional pustule! See how you like this one...” she flew up into the air, and raised her scissors, one final time, to cut a hole into the nothingness. Her very last portal.

At the center of creation, like at the center of all things, lays a raging inferno of death and fire. Hekapoo braced herself, ready to open that final door, to the place that was the forge of universes in the same way that stars were the forges of planets. She knew that, the instant the tear opened, she herself would be incinerated into nothing. She found, to her surprise, that she really did not care. Not so long as her opponent died with her. So long as she could avenge Moon.
It didn’t happen so.

The moment she lifted her scissors, a silver gauntlet caught them, forcing them shut. The creature had taken every attack so far without response, but this, apparently, it would not allow. Hekapoo felt the destructive magical force flowing through the blades of her scissors, as the phantasm held them. The magical instrument soaked the power, protecting its creator. It sent the magics far away, spreading the damage. Across universes, the forger knew, thousands of dimensional scissors were glowing green, burning up with arcane corruption, their etched names erased by a deadly hex aimed at herself.

“You know, I didn’t come for her,” Hekapoo heard the being speak, inside her own head. It finally spoke back to her now. Now that there was nothing left to say. “I came for you. She was merely in the way.”

The sorceress felt herself begin cry. She felt herself crumble. It came for her? For her!?

It meant that she had caused Moon to die. She had killed her. If only she had gone back, like the rest of the high commission, if she hadn’t spent the night on Menwni... but then, why her?

“You already know why. Because you knew me, because you would eventually understand,” the voice was cold and monotone, but the tone sounded somewhat like Moon’s kid, like Star. “Since you touched me once, upon a dream.”

Hekapoo had known what this being was, as soon as it had first touched her clones, because she had felt the magics that made it up once before. A dark spell, binding two people. A thread of lust atop a heavenly soul bond.

Hekapoo realized her mistake. Her other mistake.

She had come here to kill Moon’s murderer, at any cost. Her own life a bargain by comparison. But not only was she bound to fail against such an overwhelming foe, but, even in victory, she would have dishonored Moon’s memory. Moon would not have wanted her to avenge her death. She would have wanted her to allay her greatest fear: that her child would be left to stand alone against the night, as Moon herself once did.

Hekapoo had to survive this! To escape somehow! To be there for Star. To warn her. To, to explain to her what this foe was, and... that it wasn’t her fault, no matter what...

Summoning all her resolve, the sorceress let go of her scissors, and called upon the magics she had long used to forge them. With her bare hands, she tore a crack on the dimensional wall, just as she collapsed all other pathways behind her. It was not how it should be done, she wasn’t even sure it could even be done like this, but she had to try.

The pain was unbearable as she dug her own nails on the fabric of reality. She tumbled, rather than jumped, into her own portal. One final portal out of this place. As she fell, the tunnel began to crumble around her, and she knew she would likely not make it whole to the other end.

‘Well, if I can’t do it, then perhaps that abomination will not be able to get out from that place without a pair of scissors either,’ Hekapoo thought, right before she lost consciousness.

----

Ruberiot crawled timidly from under the debris. The throne room was unrecognizable. His eyes hurt from the dryness and the flames. His leg felt painful and his chest sore. Everything around him was muted by the shock of what he had just gone through, but it remained rather hellish
nonetheless. The stuff of a hundred epic and sorrowful arias. In the end, however, he had survived.

“I am alive! I am alive!” he shouted in relief.

“Not for long, boy,” came a cold furious voice from right in front of him. Ruberiot looked up to see the king, King River, bruised and singed, kneeling over a still figure in the center of the room. He didn’t turn away from the body, even as he spoke, “Not for long if you don’t scram from here right this instant and leave me bloody well alone!!”

Chapter End Notes

Ruberiot lives!... yay?

**Coming up next:** Chapter 16: The Prince of the Princess's Deepest Desire

*In which a duel is fought, we learn the dark secret behind the fairy tale, and a prince courts glory and death in equal measure for the sake of love and honor.*
The Prince of the Princess' Deepest Desire

Chapter Summary

In which a duel is fought, we learn the dark secret behind the fairy tale, and a prince courts glory and death in equal measure for the sake of love and honor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 16: The Prince of the Princess’ Deepest Desire

Who is the boy in the earthly attire?
The prince of the princess’ deepest desire
- The Songstrell Ruberiot (original continuity)

The dawn was dark and foggy at St. Olga’s. The sun was either fully occluded by the low flowing clouds, or it had not deigned come out altogether. It hid itself from sight, as if in fear, or in mourning.

Jackie wondered, briefly, why such unusually morbid thoughts came to her now. Was her own brief bout of melancholy simply caused by the weather? Or perhaps by the scary, yet strangely poetic, prospect of her incoming duel?

“Jackie, are you still sure you want to do this?” her boyfriend asked. Maybe he had read the worry in her expression, or maybe he simply felt the need to ask one final time, even when he knew the answer.

“Yes, Marco, I do. Don’t worry dude,” she replied, trying to affect her usual chill persona. She found it harder than usual.

Still, she very much doubted she was in any real danger. Jackie had once seen Star summon a herd of wild unicorns in one literal second. It was a fact that was well worth keeping in mind when thinking about how the princess had just spent the last half hour layering spell after spell over Jackie’s frame. She was as prepared to fight this duel as anyone could ever be.

‘Prince Jack’ was wearing a majestic golden suit of full plate armor, which covered every inch of her body except for her head. He, or she, carried a fierce looking longsword with a golden seashell for a hilt and a blade that looked sharp enough to cut diamonds. Both armor and weapon felt surprisingly light in her hands as well, or maybe, thanks to Star’s magic, she was now too strong to even notice their weight. “Honestly, Marco, right now I feel like I could take on an entire army!”

“Well, you probably could,” the princess of Mewni mused. “Actually, you might want to go a bit easy on her. Like, maybe you don’t want to tear her arm from her torso the first time she parries a hit?”

Star placed her wand against her own cheek and looked pensive for a moment, as if she couldn’t quite decide whether dismemberment was proper etiquette for a formal duel or not. Jackie personally would much rather have Snow White surrender. Sure, she knew the evil princess would
extend her no such courtesy in return, but she still felt that an actual murder would be a bad thing to carry on her conscience. Like, bad karma of sorts. Defeating a tyrant in single combat was something good guys were supposed to do. Killing disturbed teenage girls with overwhelming magical advantage? Not so much.

The trio walked into the school’s courtyard to find a huge crowd of princesses already waiting for them there, far larger than the one they saw the previous night. Clearly the news about this trial had spread like a wild fire since yesterday, and none of the girls wished to miss it, whether they were cheering for White, or silently hoping to be saved from her by Princess Marco.

Miss ‘most ruthless in all the land’ was there already as well, flaked by her usual entourage: the green-eyed brunette and the pachydermal sycophant with the camera phone. Princess White wore black chainmail trousers and an ebony steel breastplate extending into spiky shoulder pads. Honestly, thought Jackie, didn’t the princess’ sense of fashion alone gave up all pretense of not being the bad guy? As if that weren’t enough, her blood-red lips curved into a condescending smirk as she saw them approach. Her eyes quickly fixed themselves on Princess Marco. “Ah, so you did not make off during the night, after all? I was beginning to fear Cass’ prognostications were wrong for once...”

“I told you once, sister, and I’ll tell you again, you don’t scare me one bit!” Marco replied, as he sashayed forward, taking point and showing her palm to the would be dictator. “Miss Heinous doesn’t boss these girls around anymore, and soon enough, neither will you!”

“So, am I to assume you reiterate your challenge?” Snow White retorted calmly, her expression unreadable.

“You betcha I do!” Princess Marco replied. The other princess smiled viciously at this proclamation, and pushed her own coal-black hair off to the side with a swift gesture. Star gave Jackie a meaningful and worried look.

“And I... Prince Jack, will fight in Princess Marco’s stead, as her chosen and willing proxy!” she shouted, stepping forward with large resolute strides. She spoke her lines exactly as she and Star had rehearsed.

“Ah, so you are having your boyfriend fight your fight? How droll,” Princess White mocked. “Frankly, I expected better from the once-famous Princess Marco...”

Jackie felt nervous for a moment, wondering if Marco was going to let his pride derail their plans in the last minute. Star had mentioned that Marco had to accept her self-designation as proxy, in order for it to be valid, and she was sure the goth girl’s words were hard for the boy to take in stride.

“He wanted to be the one to kick your ass, Apple Pie,” Marco replied with a shrug. “What can I say, I like a man that helps at home... you know... taking out the trash!”

Murmurs and snickers rippled through the crowd, and the evil princess’ already white-as-snow skin went even whiter at the pink-clothed princess’ comeback. Or perhaps, at the mention of apples.

“Very well then,” Snow White spat, stopping the chatter in the background with a gesture of her hand. “I accept your challenge, and I will fight your Prince Jack. You will get to mourn your love first, Princess Marco, by your own choice, and then I’ll deal with you. As I am the challenged party, I choose swords.”
“Fine by me,” countered Jackie, giving her own blade an easy swirl around her right hand.

Another round of murmurs ran along the audience. It was not unlike the wind through a row of bushes. Jackie saw, through the corner of her eye, coins and multicolor bills changing hands. It took her a second to understand: the princesses were betting on the outcome of the fight.

“Hey Cass,” spoke the uglier of the two Snow White flunkies to her green-eyed comrade. “White’s got this one for sure, right?” She was eying Prince Jack’s gleaming sword with a distrustful expression.

The girl called Cass closed her eyes, looked up and spoke with a distant and foggy tone, “This fading night has seen a clash of light and darkness, the starless sky is to swallow the moon, a pair of lovers to be separated by the grim chasm of death, and the rising sun shall find royal blood spilled...”

“Alright, alright, I’ll take that as a yes,” the blue elephantine princess interrupted her friend and shook her head. “Fine, five hundred for White!”

“I raise you, six fifty for Jacki... I mean, Prince Jack!” Marco jumped in. Jackie raised an eyebrow and her boyfriend gave her a sheepish look.

“Deal,” the other girl spoke, and walked up to them to shake hands with Marco and take yet another surprise picture. “Ca-me-ra!”

It was almost like being at the park again, back in Echo Creek, with people betting on whether or not she could pull off specific stunts on the skateboard. So far, ten to one, Jackie had won almost every bet. The thought brought a confident smile to her lips, one that made her almost forget that, should she fail this time, not only would Marco be $650 poorer, they both might end up being a head shorter.

“Wait,” Star spoke, suddenly. She had been silent for a while now. “Where is Pony Head?”

Then Jackie realized; they had not seen the floating horse head, nor her little fairy companion, all morning. In fact, they hadn’t seen them since last night.

“Oh,” Princess White feigned surprise, as her face turned back from anger into a smug grin. “You needn’t worry about that. The traitors are being dealt with already. We took them into custody as you all slept.”

Star gasped. Marco let out a curse. Jackie remained silent, but her eyes went wide with horror.

“Tell me what you did to them, right now!” Star demanded, pointing her wand directly at White.

The other princess scoffed and kept quiet. She knew as well as Star, and even Jackie did, that if the mewman attacked her now, the duel would be forfeit on her and Marco’s side. Star had been the one to explain that to Jackie, after all. There was one way to get an answer though, and it was through a swift victory. Prince Jack was determined as ever to achieve just that.

For a moment, she felt herself overcome with revulsion and horror at the person she was about to fight. She didn’t even like Pony Head all that much. But still, she was quite sure that whatever ‘dealt with’ meant here, it was not something she wished on her worst enemy, much less the friend of her friend. Then again, she reminded herself, she was dealing with a power-mad dictator, right out from an analogue of a bloody revolution. It had been sheer childish naivete to think they were all safe last night. She almost kicked herself for not thinking about that earlier, for not making sure they kept an eye out for each other through the night, and for having, even for a moment, forgotten
to take the situation deadly seriously. She was sure Marco was feeling the same.

Well, there would be plenty of time for recrimination later. For now, it just drove home how dangerous this Princess White person was. Jackie needed to focus on the fight first, before anything else could go wrong.

Marco and Star walked out of the circle formed by the onlookers, leaving White and Jack in the middle, ten paces apart. All three of them glared at the dark-haired princess with silent and furious determination. The brunette, who the sociopathic princess and her other flunky had called Cass, begun counting down from ten, in a disinterested, or perhaps trance-like, tone. As per Star’s instructions, and drawing from her own fencing lessons, Jackie prepared herself. She flexed her legs into a solid stance, and held her own blade high, to block any opening attack from the pale princess.

The count reached zero and neither fighter moved a muscle. They stood there, examining each other, waiting for their opponent to make the first move. Snow White stance was impeccable, at least as far as Jackie was capable of judging it. She soon realized that, as it came to technique, she was probably far outmatched. Well, fortunately, she did have a secret weapon that should more than even the odds.

Prince Jack lunged forward and sliced a broad horizontal slide as his opening move. If White jumped backwards, then he might break her balance. If she parried, then she could test her magical strength and force her off balance.

The dark haired princess chose to parry. Jackie’s bright clean blade impacted the wicked looking jagged sword of Snow White with a loud clang. The Earth girl had calibrated her swing to be but a light tap, not knowing her own strength yet. Slowly, she began to apply more and more force, expecting the other princess’ resistance to give in, sooner rather than later. However, Princess White did not budge, not one bit. She held their contest long past the point at which Jackie was giving it her all. The tyrant princess smiled.

Had the spell perhaps failed somehow? Was she not as strong as Star had predicted? Jackie looked down, and saw the stone floor crack under the pressure her feet exerted on it as she dug-in to push against her rival!

“You are strong. Very strong,” Princess White remarked. She smiled. It was a vicious knowing smile. “I am stronger!”

Jackie felt the force being applied on the other side of their tug of war explode and come crashing against her own blade. On reflex, she let go, and jumped to the side. A second blow followed the first, as Snow White’s blade came swinging downwards on her position. The gold-clad prince fell to the floor and rolled away just in time, recovering her stance a second after with one swift movement.

Princess White’s strike missed her mark and hit the ground directly. A long fissure, arm deep, extended from the point of impact until right before the feet of the nearest onlookers. The crowd gasped. Star covered her mouth in surprise. Marco went almost as pale as their enemy.

Marco felt terrified as he saw the princess slash an incredibly deep cut on the stone foundation of the courtyard. Whatever Snow White was, it wasn’t human! Hell, by all accounts she wasn’t mewman either. Star was strong, but not this strong. He wasn’t even sure Miss Skullnick was this strong. And unlike Miss Skullnick, the dark princess was fast, horrifyingly fast.
She moved like a bladed tornado, slashing and lunging. Marco could hardly follow; by the time he comprehended the last feint, the tyrant princess had already launched her next attack. Through it all, Jackie kept parrying and evading, and the Earth boy couldn’t help but be impressed at her skill. Her magical strength must have been astounding as well, since she could withstand to block against the force of White’s hits. Unfortunately, it was also quite clear that ‘Prince Jack’ was barely holding on the defensive and had no hope in sight of a successful counterattack.

“Gotta give it to you, Princess Marco,” he heard Snow White quip as she kept on her onslaught, “you surely know how to find yourself a real catch. It is been a good long while since anyone stood this long against my blade. I will have fun skewering this prince charming, I’ll tell you that. And know that, as I rip out his still beating heart with my blade, I will be thinking of you. It will make it even sweeter!”

The boy felt the anger swell within him, and for a second he was ready to jump in, with a shout and a karate chop. Discreetly, Star grabbed him from behind his shirt, pulling him back. If he intervened, then the duel was forfeit, and is not like he would be more effective against the armed princess than Jackie was, especially with all of Star’s magic layered on top of her.

Then again, duel or not, Marco hoped Star would intervene if things got truly dire. He had taken her aside, made her promise nothing would happen to Jackie. The mewman princess had said nothing could go wrong, not with all she had cast on the other girl, but that, if for any reason it did, then she would break the rules of the duel herself, and, quote: ‘go all narwhal on Princess White’s ass’.

But, to Marco’s eyes, it looked like things had gone wrong already. A bad thought wormed itself into Marco’s mind. What if Star decided not to intervene? What if the mewman girl was ok with Jackie dying? He thought back to Ruberiot’s song, and to puppet Star jealous and hurt about puppet Jackie and puppet Marco. He thought back to a certain Game of Flags, and to the tactics Star was prepared to use to win... No! That was crazy. There was no way Star would want Jackie to get hurt!

“Ripping out people’s hearts? Sounds like quite the wicked queen style, Apple Cider,” Marco forced himself, or herself, to retort. It was a lame comeback, hounded as he was with insane, yet absurdly persistent, worries. He hoped to at least distract the raven-haired girl from her attacks. “You claim not to be a tyrant, to be fighting to help these girls. But look at her, sisters, is that a liberator? Or just an even crueler oppressor?!”

Princess White threw a savage look Marco’s way, as she grinned maliciously and pushed against Jackie with ever more vicious strikes. “Cruelty is in the eye of the beholder. I merely have the will to do what I must, and the courage to fight my own battles. Unlike fake leaders who sacrifice even their loved ones as pawns!”

Marco fell silent at that comeback, partly because he could not deny, deep down, that he still felt guilty about letting his girlfriend fight for him. Whether it was Star or Jackie, it didn’t matter. It should have been him.

A chuckle interrupted his thoughts, and as he turned back to look at the fight, he saw not Snow White, but Prince Jack, grinning and laughing under her breath as she blocked yet another downwards strike. “Please, I am no one’s pawn. I fight because I want to fight. If you had a single love, or a single friend, in all of the world, you would understand that. That you don’t, only tells me, and these girls, what a miserable, quid-pro-quo, lonely bitch you are!”

“How dare you!” Snow White slashed horizontally, quickly and ferociously. But even Marco could tell her movements had gotten a fair bit more sloppy. “I am loved by millions! And I protect them,
I guide them, in return! My subjects, these princesses, my friends, they all adore me!"

“Really?” Marco shouted at her, providing at least verbal backup, seizing on the nerve Jackie had apparently hit with her own declaration. “Because from where I am standing, it looks to me like they fear your crazy bloodthirsty ass!”

“You are a rotten apple, and they know it,” Jackie pressed on. “I bet not even your two cronies would put their lives on the line for you! Not one of those people you claim love you would do what I am doing now. None. Not for you.”

“Well,” Snow White replied, her tone suddenly glacial, “after what they are about to witness... they would be utter fools to follow your example!”

The dark-haired princess swung her blade furiously at the blond prince, and the jagged sword made contact, right against Prince Jack’s stomach. It hit the middle of her glinting golden armor. Princess White’s strike, powerful enough to break the ground apart, stopped a hair’s width away from the metal plate. In the air, near the point of impact, shimmered golden waves of light, looking a bit like those created by a pebble hitting the surface of water. Something around the armor itself stopped the vicious princess’ attack, something powerful and magic in nature.

In her rush to deliver a mortal blow, the goth had left herself exposed in return, and Prince Jack took the opportunity to deliver well deserved payback. Her blade came down on her opponent’s shoulder, and it tore through the steel shoulder pads and the chain mail beneath as if through butter. Whatever the jagged sword of the tyrant-princess was made of, it had held remarkably well, Marco realized, against what was surely a magical edge in Prince Jack’s sword. Unfortunately for Princess White, her armor was not made of the same stuff. Jackie’s blade dug into the other fighter’s flesh, cutting a hand’s width below the shoulder. Blood splashed around, and Marco reminded himself not to ever misjudge Star, or question her assurances, ever again.

----

Snow White stepped backwards, howling in pain. No matter how strong, this strike should have severed the nerves to her sword arm. The fight was done. Star recognized a crippling injury when she saw one, even if the two human kids did not. In a Mewni duel, this was the time where the victor was supposed to either make a spectacle of it, or, more rarely, a show of mercy.

So it came as great surprise to the mewman when Snow White lunged forward again, with her half-severed arm responding almost as well as if it were unharmed, and rammed the toothy-looking blade towards Jackie’s face.

The human girl yelled in surprise, and Star could not fault her in the least. She would have been scared too, even knowing what was going to happen. The glimmering golden waves of the magical barrier rose in front of Prince Jack’s unprotected face just the same as they would have over any part of the surface of her armor. Like, wouldn’t it be sort of pointless if the spell protected everything but her head? Duh! That was the most important part!

“Guess now I know where all that bravery of yours comes from,” Snow White commented, one part mockery and two parts exasperation. Her pointed fangs showed as her face turned into an angry frown.

Wait, her pointed fangs?! Since when did she have fangs? They were small, to be sure, but definitely inhuman. They were not, like, small cute Oskar-fangs, but sort of like, well, Tom-fangs, perhaps even longer...
“Well,” Star spoke, “and where does yours come from? Because I feel you were just dealt a-, a-, a dis-ar-ming blow, apple... mmm... juice?”

Compared to Marco’s and Jackie’s smack talk, Star felt seriously out of the game. Perhaps she needed to practice this sort of thing more...

“Oh,” the wicked princess smirked back at her. “So you mean you haven’t figured it out? Even knowing who I am? Even knowing the legend?”

“What legend, Apple Peel?” Jackie asked in turn, now recovered from the shock and swatting away her opponent’s blade with her own. “The part about choking on fruit? Or living in a house alone with seven midgets?”

“No,” Snow White said, coldly, and Star noticed the red irises shining in the fog. “But ask yourselves, this, then: What do you make of a girl, with skin as white as snow, as cold as snow, as dead as snow...”

Thunder crackled around them, far away they heard the howling of wolves, and the evil princess dropped all pretense of humanity. Her limbs stretched and bent in unnatural ways, her face twisted into a grotesque visage, full of ridges and sharp fangs and drool. She moved faster than before, stroke more violent than before. Jackie could not block or riposte a single hit now. Hit after hit, the black sword connected against the golden armor. Or, in reality, millimeters above, against the shielding spell. But Star knew what the other princess seemed to intuit: every impact took some of the protection away. The magical defenses she had cast on Jackie were very powerful, extraordinarily powerful, but they were not inexhaustible.

“... with hair as black as coal, as black as night, as black as raven’s wings...” Snow White continued, as she kept pressing her assault. Soon they could all hear the metallic clang of the sword actually hitting the armor, even as faint circles of golden sparks still drifted out on every hit.

“... with lips as red as...” the blade hit Jackie’s cheek, and despite the magical shield, it sliced a shallow cut on the side of her face. Snow White took her own blade to her lips and licked it, hungrily “... blood!”

Every princess around the circle looked horrified now. Even Princess White’s two friends were taking a step backwards and shaking their heads in terror. The vampire looked around at all of them, and began laughing malevolently into the night.

“Oh, I so had hoped to keep the charade a bit longer,” she spoke. “Rebel princesses? A glorious fight against their oppressors? Give me a break! Fine, you win, Princess Marco, Prince Jack, you have unmasked me!” the fiend cackled with a deranged grin. Then it went silent all of a sudden and looked back down at Jackie, who stood her ground despite trembling knees. “Now, die!”

----

The next strike smashed the side of her armor, cracking it and bending it slightly inwards. A sharp jolt of pain spread along her left side as some of the impact was transferred through the metal to her ribs. Jackie had been feeling the hits for a while. The strike before this one, the one to her face, had even cut her skin. Now it felt as if the magical protection wasn’t there at all anymore. Even when White slashed only at the parts of her body covered by hard armor plating it hurt like a motherfucker. If she got hit in the fleshy bits now, even once, it would be game over, Jackie was certain of it.

She focused on every fencing lesson she had ever had, tried the best she could to block the super-
humanly fast swings of the vampire’s blade. ‘Yes, Snow White is not only an aspiring dictator, she is also a fucking vampire, how crazy is that? No, Jackie, focus, come on, like your life depends on it!’ she mentally admonished herself.

Turns out that fighting for your life is not like fencing at all. You feel something awful drop in your stomach, you feel your muscles tense, you see your short life flashing before your eyes. At the same time, you are moving, and you are jumping, and you are shifting your balance from foot to foot, because if you miss a step, if you fumble a block, then you are dead. She was managing to hold off the monster’s attacks now, which she never could when the magical barrier was protecting her, not after Snow White went full undead horror on her. Funny what adrenaline and the prospect of imminent dead, combined with magically enhanced reflexes, could do for you.

But in the end, it was only a question of time. And not much time at that. Soon Jackie saw it, the slash that she would not be able to parry. The one that she could not get away from. It was headed straight for her neck. Time seemed to literally slow down as the edge of the wicked blade drew closer and closer. Oh well, maybe Marco and Star had been right after all, she was not ready for adventure. It turned out, her first inter-dimensional jaunt with them would be her last.

Wait. Time was literally slowing down! Not figuratively slowing down, literally slowing to a crawl! Out of the corner of her eye, Jackie saw Star walk into the circle of the arena, her wand glowing, her face contorted in concentration.

“Hey Jackie,” she spoke, apologetically.

“Hey Star,” the human girl retorted. Surprisingly, she could move her mouth, but not the rest of her body. It felt sort of like a dream, and so did their conversation. “Thought Marco said you didn’t freeze time anymore.”

“I am not freezing it, just slowing it, and well, it’s kind of an emergency situation, you know,” the mewman explained.

“Oh, I know,” Jackie retorted. With some difficulty, she managed to move her eyes to point meaningfully at the blade slowly inching towards her neck. She wanted to ask Star how exactly it was that she could only move some parts of herself at normal speed, even as her mind processed things about as fast as Star moved, and everything else was near frozen. But perhaps this was not the time.

“So, just to be clear, Jackie,” Star announced, apologetically. “I am about to forfeit your duel and try to incinerate her with as much solar power as I can manage to summon with this thing. Not sure if it will be enough, but I think at this point the ideological debate is settled, so I am sure none of the princesses are going to side with her, which makes this much easier and...”

“Wait, Star, don’t,” Jackie begged.

“Don’t?” the princess replied confused.

“Just, like, give me a two seconds head start when you unfreeze things,” she had to ask for that at least, as much as it pained her. Otherwise she was dead for sure. “But don’t do anything else, let me finish this myself.”

“Jackie, that’s insane! She is a freaking vampire! Probably a really old one or something, considering how strong she is. We couldn’t anticipate this. This is clearly out of your league. She might be out of my league too. So, well, let’s fight her together,” Star spoke. It was a way out, an easy way out, without Jackie having to admit she was weak, because Star herself said this was a
formidable opponent, for either of them.

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” Jackie repeated. “Look, Star, I challenged her. I had my own aces up my sleeve and she still managed to surprise us. But that doesn’t change the fact that I agreed to fight her, fair and square, or at least relatively so... so, two seconds head start?”

“Jackie...” Star seemed visibly conflicted. “Are you sure? Marco would say no, if he could hear you. He would tell me to disregard everything you are saying and to blast her with everything I got...”

“Yeah,” Jackie agreed. She smiled, which was hard to do when time was half-frozen. “Hey, if she kills me, then you got him all for yourself, right?”

“Don’t even joke about that...” Star replied. “Two seconds head start, and I am not sure I will be able to stop things in time again. You better make it out alive, Jackie, or I swear I am going to personally whoop your ass afterwards, ok?”

Jackie chuckled. Then she moved like lightning to parry Snow White’s strike. Time resumed anew, as did her life and dead dance with a bloodsucking vampire. Why the hell did she need to be so stubborn? If you asked Jackie, even she wouldn’t be able to tell you. But she had to all the same.

From that stubbornness rose a fighting spirit that surpassed even that triggered by the risk of impending death. For to admit defeat after claiming this challenge, would inexplicably have been much worse than to die. Jackie was not fighting for Horse Head, or even for Marco, and she was not fighting for her own skin. She was fighting for her honor and her self-respect, and that, right now, seemed even more vital. With renewed strength, she was first able to hold Princess White’s assault, and then to press her own offensive. Soon the vampire was taking backwards steps and making use of all its unholy strength just to parry the slashes from the golden prince Jack.

As soon as she saw a clear opening, Jackie committed herself to the one final push, even at the cost of leaving herself open to a fatal blow. She planted both feet firmly in the ground, gripped the pommel of her sword with all of her enhanced strength, and delivered a punishing lunge. The strike pierced White’s armor and buried the point of her sword deep into her chest, carving a hole right through her most vital center and coming out, again through black metal, on the other end.

The undead abomination simply chuckled at the futile attempt, and slashed back towards the human’s head, undeterred. Prince Jack jumped backwards, out of the vampire’s reach. But in doing so, she had to let go of her sword, which remained stuck inside the tyrant princess’ unbeating heart.

“You don’t know much about vampires, do you, Prince Jack?” Snow White scolded her, as she advanced in her direction, without bothering to remove the sword from her chest. The pointy end was sticking through the back of the girl and it still didn’t seem to bother her. “A metal sword won’t do it. Even a wooden stake won’t work. Not on me. It would just shatter against my flesh. Only the sun can harm me, and the sun will not dare shine on this forsaken school. Not as long as I can be said to rule over here. The sun won’t save you, unless I lose, and without it you cannot win. All you can do now is useless!” she laughed, “Useless!”

The evil princess lunged towards the gold armored prince, pushing the point of her curved sword towards her face. The human managed to avoid the blow, but in doing so, she lost her footing and fell to the ground. Out of the corner of her eye, Jackie saw Star’s grip around her wand tense. She
forced herself to flash a reassuring grin towards the mewman. Anything to stop her from intervening.

White lifted her wicked blade once more and followed through with a downward slice. Prince Jack should have been finished. He was in the floor, he was unarmed, he had no way to block or to dodge. But Jackie Lynn Thomas did. She did as she had done so many times in the past, as she had done the countless times she had fallen to the floor, learning to ride her skateboard: she got up. She got up by pushing down with one hand and with both her legs, rolling her body as she rose to her feet. It was a trick to get up quickly after a fall, and with a normal human strength and reflexes it would have gotten her standing straight in just a second. With a magically-enhanced body, it sent her flying into the air, above Princess White. The acrobatic maneuver ended with her falling back to the ground, on her feet, behind the raven-haired creature of the night.

The vampire twisted around to attack once more, but Jackie was long ready. With a swift movement, she kicked Snow White’s wrist, causing her to release the grip on her cruel black sword. At the same time, she lunged forward and grabbed her own blade, ripping it from the bloody monster’s chest in a single movement, then swinging it back around, until the edge was resting directly on the former tyrant’s neck.

“So, only sunlight and no stakes, right? Well... how about decapitation?” she asked, with a cold controlled tone. Her opponent froze as the blade touched the snow-cold skin. “I hear that works on vampires well enough, at least in the tales they tell where I am from. Maybe you are special, Snowflake. But, guess what? So is this sword. And we already know it can cut you. So, the question is: how do you think you’ll fare without a head?”

“Please, if you were really going to do it, you would have tried it already, like you did in your last two futile attempts at harming me. But don’t think I don’t notice what the difference is, Prince Jack: now you have the time to think and I am disarmed. I think you don’t have the guts for an execution,” Snow White replied, as she begun to smirk. “That’s what I love about knights in shining armor, by the way, so noble, so predictable, and so utterly harmless.”

“You know, it is true I don’t like killing people, so you might have been right,” Jackie pretended to concede, “…if you were alive. But you are not people, are you? Way I see it, you are a corpse already, so why should I care in how many pieces I leave you?”

Princess White remained silent, immobile, held there with a sword to her neck. In all fairness, vampires seemed sentient, so the ethics of this weren’t quite as uncomplicated as Jackie was trying to pretend. She wondered for a second if, by sparing Snow White, a literal bloodsucking monster, she would be responsible for her future victims. Then she wondered if vampires were inherently evil or had as much free will as anyone else, to be good or bad as they chose. She admonished herself that Snow White didn’t seem like the kind to ever be redeemed, then admonished herself again that it was probably not her call to make. It wouldn’t have been, if she were human.

“Tell you what,” spoke gallant Prince Jack, “I’ll let you amble on some more, on three conditions. The first is your full surrender in this duel, of course. The second, is that you tell me where Princess Pony Head and Princess Glintwisp are, and that they be unharmed. If you have hurt either of them in any way that they won’t be fully recovered from by tonight, the deal is off and, make no mistake, I will end you. The third is that you scramble out of here and never again show your ugly face in St. O’s or in the presence of myself or my friends. How does that sound? I’d say it is pretty generous, all things considered. Reject that deal, and you will find my nobility to be quite flexible when it comes to your kind.”

Blood-red lips pursed together as the princess frowned in thought, and Jackie pushed the blade
closer to her neck to help her decision along. Finally, Snow White replied, “they are in the highest room atop tower three, or what your famous Princess Marco left of it. I haven’t fed on either of them, nor had a chance to torture them. I was saving that... pleasure... for after our duel.” The creature grinned and Jackie felt herself reconsider her mercy. “I do promise not to come back to this stink-hole, and to leave you and your princess Marco alone,” Jackie caught on and pushed the slightest bit further into the sneaky creature’s neck, “...as well as the mewman and all the princesses here. And... and... I concede.”

The evil princess let both her arms fall to her sides, and withdrew back her fangs. Her monstrous visage transformed back into one of unblemished fairytale beauty, except for the resentful scowl it bore. A roar of cheers erupted all around them, accompanied by a chant of “Jack, Jack, Jack!”

As the princesses rejoiced, the fog began to lift, and the sky started to brighten. Whatever held back the dawn was gone the moment the vampire princess admitted defeat. Snow White took a step backwards, and Jackie allowed her to do so. She beamed her a victorious cocksure smile. And the charming Prince Jack said, “looks like the sun is coming up after all. I’d be getting out of here while you still can, if I were you!”

Like a bat out of hell, the dark-haired princess scrambled for the gates of St. Olga’s. Thin threads of smoke began raising from her back and the top of her head. She ran out into the dead trees surrounding the school, seeking refuge from the rising sun, and soon vanished into the wilderness.

“Well, Snow White... how do you like them... apples!?” cried Princess Marco from behind her brave prince. A fair number among the audience, and Jackie herself, groaned.

But, in all fairness, hearing her boyfriend speak reminded Jackie of one thing, one thing she still had left to do, that she wanted to do, needed to do after the fight. Her heart was pumping, her breathing still fast, and she felt, well, she felt invincible! She had to prolong this feeling of victory, and there was only one way she could think of as to how. A perfect way to cap a perfect adventure.

“Star, sorry to be selfish, but would you mind checking up on Pony Head and Glintwisp?” Jackie finally spoke. She walked tiredly back towards the Mewman princess and gave her back the magical golden sword. For all she knew, it might turn into a pumpkin before the end of the day. Star had said none of the spells were even close to permanent.

“Yeah, sure, but, don’t you want to... oooohhh,” Star stopped in mid-sentence, as Prince Jack effortlessly lifted Princess Marco up and began walking back into the mansion that housed the former school, with the pink dressed rebel princess cradled in his arms.

“Jack! Jack! Jack!”

----

Marco’s heart was pounding as he let himself be whisked away through dim lit corridors and portrait-decorated stairways. They were alright. They were safe. They had won! No, Jackie had won, and she had been... amazing!

He looked up, at the girl in the princely disguise. She was carrying him through the hallways of Saint Olga’s, holding him delicately and effortlessly in front of herself, one arm under his upper back and the other under his knees. He smiled a faint nervous smile, and she gave him a confident grin in return.

It was not that he approved of it, of the risks Jackie had taken. Princess White had been terrifying, and it was doubly terrifying when you weren’t the one in the line of fire. Marco had been in many
life or death fights in the last year of rooming with Star, and he had been Toffee’s prisoner once. The smug lizard was probably the only foe he knew who might have been even more dangerous than the vampire princess. And yet, he hadn’t been one tenth as scared when facing him, as he had been watching Jackie and White fight. It was always worse to see your loved ones endanger themselves on your behalf, especially when they were obviously under-prepared for the fray. He almost never worried like that about Star, not because he cared for her any less, far from it, but because, well, she was Star! She was the strongest person he knew.

But, then again, was Jackie any weaker? Was she really? Given what he had just seen, Marco was inclined to say no. A part of his brain kept nagging at him that it should have been him out there, fighting that duel instead. But if it had indeed been him, even empowered by Star’s magic just as much as ‘Prince Jack’ had been, would the result have been the same? Would he have won? Could he have won? A voice in his head told him that he wouldn’t have, couldn’t have. If he had fought instead of Jackie, then he would likely now be dead, and all would have been lost for the princesses of St. O’s. The idea that he might be, in the end, the weaker of the three, surprised him. As did the fact that he didn’t seem to have a problem with it. Not if it was Star and Jackie, as opposed to say, Jeremy, who bested him.

He had always had the biggest crush on Jackie, going as far as he could remember. He was always in awe of how confident, how athletic, how popular, how all around awesome she was. Sure, today she had literally been the day’s hero: the fairytale prince conquering the evil monster and delivering freedom onto the masses. But then again, she had always been his hero (or, well, heroine).

“You know, Jackie, that was really, really cool,” he finally said. In the battle between the side of him that wanted to tell her to never do something like that ever again, and the side of him that was overcome with awe, the second won. “But, well, are you alright?”

“You mean after nearly dying fighting a literal bloodthirsty creature of the night?” Jackie replied. She beamed at him. “Honestly, never been better!”

“That’s... good,” Marco responded, unable to think of anything smarter to say. “Eh, shouldn’t we be looking for Pointy Head and Glintwisp?”

“Star can handle that. It’s not like we would get to them any quicker if we are with her, and I think Horse Head would prefer seeing her than us,” reasoned the skateboarder girl. “Besides, I believe this is the part of the story in which the prince, having rescued his princess and defended her honor, gets his well deserved reward...”

“Oh,” was all the boy was able to say in return. For a moment it was like the last few months had never happened, and he was back to literally being unable to form coherent sentences in the presence of Jackie Lynn Thomas, or Prince Jack, or whomever she or he was.

The golden-armored knight looked down at him with a slight frown. “I mean, you know I am being tongue in cheek here, right? You can always say no if not in the mood, Marco... it’s just, you’d be surprised how much of a turn on this sort of adrenaline is...”

“No, sister, I hear ya,” replied the boy, taking on her best Princess Marco persona. Weirdly enough, he felt more sure of himself with that. He also knew, from experience, exactly what Jackie was talking about.

“Sister?” Jackie raised an eyebrow. Then, affecting what Marco was sure was her best attempt at a masculine low bass voice. “I am afraid you must be mistaking me for someone else, milady.”
Marco rolled his eyes. “I am not a...” he begun. But something in the look Jackie gave him, a smoldering desire-filled look, made him stop mid-sentence.

Soon after, they reached one of the rooms they had slept in the night before. Jackie’s room, actually, rather than his and Star’s. The girl in the prince costume kicked the door open, and as she did, Marco felt a wave of warm and light surround both of them. He blinked a few times, then realized, to his surprise, and Jackie’s as well, that the golden armor had vanished into thin air. Underneath, Prince Jack’s original green, white and gold outfit, remained unchanged.

“Wait, Jackie, are Star’s spells fading? What about the extra strength?” He asked, worried for a moment that she was going to collapse from exhaustion from the fight, without the added energy provided by the spells. “Do you need me to get off from you?”

“Heh, Marco, I can carry you without any magic, whenever you want,” Jackie boasted, in her normal voice. “Besides, I think the strength has been fading slowly ever since the end of the fight, I think I am only about fifty percent stronger than usual by now. Which I guess is a good thing...”

Prince Jack didn’t go into any specifics, but the phrase ‘death by Snu Snu’ came to Marco’s mind. He had to agree it was a good thing that his girlfriend could no longer crush rocks with her bare hands.

“So, do you really want me to...” Marco felt uncomfortable saying it, “... be the girl?”

Jackie raised an eyebrow at him, as if asking if that was going to be too different from their usual fare. Marco had to admit that, even with some practice under his belt now, the blond haired girl had always been the more confident assertive one. And is not like Prince Jack was suddenly going to pull out a golden strap-on from beneath his dark green trousers... at least Marco hoped he wouldn’t, she wouldn’t. Marco wasn’t sure exactly what Star’s magic had done to Jackie, but he knew he himself was exactly as he always was, just in girl clothes. Even so, there was still a difference, in his mind, between whatever it was that their dynamic usually was, and, well, this.

“Yeah, Marco,” Jack spoke in her ear, as he gently let her down on the large soft bed, “I want you to be my princess for tonight. And I want to be your prince. Do you want that too?”

“... Yes,” Marco responded. To his own surprise, he knew he was being honest. It was very confusing, and scary, and new, and exciting.

Now, Marco knew that he was more in contact with his feminine side than most guys. Jackie herself was a tomboy, Marco realized as well. She could pull off ‘girly’ better than almost anyone in school, and yet, she was most at ease being one of the guys. He also knew that there were people for which the gender they were born at never quite, well, fit. He didn’t think that was quite his case, nor Jackie’s for that matter (although, if it was, he was going to be there for Jack just as much as for Jackie, that was a given). No, he thought, taking stock of the kind of smirk ‘Prince Jack’ was giving him, or her, or whatever. This wasn’t about any personal revelation for either of them, it was play, and it was transgression, and it was fantasy, and it was deliciously strange. Weird-awesome, he thought, remembering Star’s phrase.

A moment later, his deliberations were forgotten as he felt Jackie’s lips on his neck, her hands roaming his torso atop the pink frilly blouse of his dress. He let himself enjoy it, wondering for a second if being passive was unfairly stereotypical of the role he was supposed to play. But Jackie, no, Prince Jack, seemed to be enjoying it, and Marco was enjoying it, and that was in the end what mattered.

Marco felt Prince Jack unbutton her blouse, he felt her hands on his nipples, then her mouth kissing
him there, sucking on them. He imagined for a moment what it would feel to have breasts, to feel the sensations that he had seen reflected in Jackie’s and Star’s faces whenever he did that for them. What little it did for him physiologically, the image of Jackie ravishing him there was a surprisingly arousing one for the boy.

“Oh, woah,” the skateboarder girl almost yelped in surprise, “I didn’t know these got hard on you too! Does it feel good?”

Marco chuckled. “Well, it probably doesn’t do for me what it does for you... do you want me to, like, pretend to moan or something?”

“Dude, don’t ever fake it!” she admonished him, in her normal Jackie tone. “I mean... I don’t.”

“Ok, ok, then I got an idea Jacki... eh, Prince Jack,” Princess Marco replied. “Can you stand up from the bed? I think you are quite right, my prince, that you earned a reward, fighting for my honor and all...”

He couldn’t help but think to himself that that had been a bit forced, and a lot more meek than what Rebel Princess Marco was supposed to be all about. But it would do. This wasn’t a usual situation for the rabble-rouser of St O’s anyways, so how was Marco to know what was or wasn’t her style to say under the circumstances?

Jackie raised an eyebrow, but did as he asked. “Alright little lady, what did you have in mind?” she said. There was something Harrison Ford-esque about the look she gave him.

Then, Marco slid from the bed, his blouse still open and hanging down to the sides. He literally crawled on his knees to where ‘Prince Jack’ was and roamed his hands up through her legs. With a swift movement, he undid the button of her trousers and pulled down both the pants and a set of sea green boxer shorts. He looked up and fluttered his eyelashes, then pressed his mouth towards Jackie’s crotch and begun lapping at it in wide motions. Slow at first, then faster as he was able to confirm his girlfriend’s arousal. Soon his tongue was exploring the length of her lips, and the inside of her folds, and occasionally flicking at her sensitive nub.


For months after, at night, before going to sleep, Marco would feel slightly and irrationally ashamed, of how hard hearing those words made him that night.

’Princess Marco’ kept going at it until Jackie, even with her still ever so slightly bolstered strength, found that her weakened knees made it hard for her to maintain the position. She, or he, or whatever, pushed a hand down and lifted Marco up, motioning him to the bed.

Just before the boy, who was a princess, sat down, Jackie pulled the skirt of his dress up, and removed the entire thing, throwing it to the side of the bed. She pushed herself out of her boots, and the reminder of her lower garments. In a superman-like move, she literally ripped her own white shirt open, sending buttons flying all over the room with the last of her added strength. Her boobs bounced free in the air.

It should have been the end of the game. She was no longer dressed like a handsome prince, he was no longer dressed like a princess. It should have been the end of Prince Jack and Princess Marco. But it wasn’t. Not yet. Not for the next few moments. The moments in which Princess Marco lied down in the bed, blushing and excited, yearning to feel her prince’s touch. The moments in which Prince Jack, after winning the battle and rescuing the princess, got his reward, climbing atop his love and embracing her, plunging himself into her. That is what it was in his
mind, for all that the prince’s anatomy was rather more concave than convex. But they were united, and Prince Jack was thrusting, and Princess Marco was moaning, and there was no faking in it at all.

It felt liberating, to be able to enjoy the ride and get lost in the sensation, and be loud and unconstrained, in a way he never quite managed to do as a guy. Marco also felt wanted, hungered for, in a way that was different than any he had experienced before. Later he would ask Jackie, and she would tell him how powerful she felt, like she was doing things to him, like she was ‘the one screwing you silly’. And Marco would say that she screwed him silly every time they had sex, and she would say that it wasn’t the same. But right then, in that moment, Marco knew only his part, and he knew he was getting lost in the sensations, and he was cresting up and up. Finally, he exploded and, as he came, he came loudly and shamelessly, with a whimpering moan.

“That was... intense,” Jackie finally said, many seconds after, being the first to recover.

“Yes, yes it was,” Marco agreed. “Hey, Jackie, if you ever feel like you should have been a guy, you can tell me...”

“Nah, dude, pretty sure they gave me the right equipment. But I enjoyed playing the part today, even more than I thought I would,” she winked at him. “You can also tell me if being Princess Marco feels better than being dude-Marco, I think I’d be ok, if it was you...”

“Pretty sure I am a guy, Jackie.”

“A guy who can pull off pink better than me!”

“Hey sister, if you got it, flaunt it!”

They both laughed together at that, then stayed there, silently looking at the ceiling, taking a comfortable pause from a truly insane pair of days. Even by the standards of his life after meeting Star, Marco was pretty sure these last 48 hours had been extraordinarily wild. Once they were back to Echo Creek, he was looking forward to a week or two in which nothing much out of the ordinary happened. At least if ordinary included his impossibly good luck of dating both his childhood crush and his best friend.

“We should get dressed and find Star,” Marco finally spoke.

Chapter End Notes

Author Note 1: And finally a chapter ending in a happy note! Weren't we starting to miss those? :) That said, Star hasn't seen Ponyhead yet, and knows nothing about mommy dear, so...

----

Author Note 2: Please do note that it was none other than Neil Gaiman, in 'Snow, Glass, Apples', who first stated the incredibly obvious: that Snow White is, and has always been, an undead creature of the night.

----
Author Note 3: Alternate ending to the Prince Jack / Snow White fight:

Snow: "Rebel princesses? A glorious fight against their oppressors? Give me a break! Fine, you win, Princess Marco, Prince Jack, you have unmasked me! Now, die!"

Star: "Ze WURDO!!"*

Time freezes, soundtrack goes silent, Star walks up to Jackie, takes the sword from her immobile hands, decapitates a frozen vampire Snow White, puts sword back in Jackie's hands, exits stage left.

* Because "Easy Peasy Time Freezy" is too mainstream, or, not mainstream enough...

---

Coming up next: Chapter 17: Reveal to Me That Which is Hidden.
Chapter 17: Reveal to Me That Which is Hidden

Were Star to be entirely honest with herself, she would have had to admit she felt a little bit neglected as Jackie carried their boyfriend off into the sunrise, leaving her to deal with the fallout of the duel. In a similar spirit of honesty, however, Star would also have had to admit that Jackie had well and truly earned it. If she hadn’t done so by defeating White, then she had by leaving the other two teens alone to sort out their issues the previous night.

It was exceedingly fair that it was now the skateboarder girl who got some time alone with Marco. It was also no lie to say that Star was way happier for him, and for Jackie, than she was sad for herself. She knew that she would have her own opportunities to celebrate with Marco later, when they were back home, after all. Nevertheless, and despite the disguises, having the two of them flee together so publicly, and leave her the odd girl out in front of all these princesses, was a bit irritating. Only a bit, not much; and then only if she were being honest with herself.

Star Butterfly was seldom honest with herself.

“Ok, you!” she pointed her wand at the lanky green-eyed brunette, the girl Snow White had called Cass. “Take me to where she put Pony Head, and don’t you dare make a wrong move!”

Star didn’t exactly know where the top of tower three was, not from the inside at least, having never been there. The last time they were in St. O’s, she simply blew up the transmorbidian crystal with a far reaching blast from the courtyard grounds. That was not, generally, the approach to take when rescuing hostages, and so she could use a guide. White’s former two flunkies were at this point the chief candidates, given that they would know for sure where the evil princess kept any prisoners. Of those two, Star had enough experience with the tusked purple princess not to want her anywhere near her face. So that left the other one. Better the devil you didn’t know, reasoned Star. After all, strangers were often just friends you hadn’t met.

Cass, turned out, was a princess of few words. In response to Star’s order and, well, implied threat, she simply nodded, and begun walking towards the tower. She opened the door and guided the mewman up the spiral stairway. Right before she followed her inside, Star observed that the top of the spire had actually been fully replaced: a wooden watchtower now sat atop the cylindrical stone base of the half-crumbling edifice. Whoops! She might have gone a teeny tiny bit overboard with her spells last time she was here!

They walked alone. Not because the princesses of St. Olga’s had any particular respect for the privacy of Star’s reunion with her best bestie on all of Mewni. But because, Snow White being gone and all, they had decided to throw an impromptu party to celebrate their newly recovered
freedom. Despite the vague sense of irritation with which her friends’ departure had left her, Star smiled.

It seemed that not only the sun had returned the moment the vampire princess of fairy tale folklore had admitted defeat, but also, just as quickly, the true spirit of the St. Olga’s rebel princesses was back as well: that of rebellion, not against their parents, or against any perceived higher authority, but only against responsibility itself. Which, all in all, suited Star just fine. Sure, she had to get Pony Head and Glintwisp back first but, soon enough, all five of them would join the party, and then she would get to be as carefree as all the other rebel princesses. She would leave dealing with her mom, and whatever she thought of her relationship and her public image, for another day.

Another day like, say: never.

“So, I was wondering,” she queried her guide, as the two princesses were about halfway up the tower and the cheers outside had begun to become too muted to hear. “Why were you on Snow White’s side? I mean, no offense, but, well, you don’t seem… I dunno… evil? Guess I can understand if you didn’t know what she was, but…”

“Her darkness was apparent to me from the moment I first laid my eyes on her, same as for you now,” Cass replied. Her tone flat as she walked forward, giving no sign of surprise or concern.

“You mean you knew she was a vampire? But then…” Star pondered, flicking her wand against her chin. Then, suddenly, in realization, she jumped, pointing her wand back at Cass. Her expression went fierce and hard, as she steeled herself for the fight ahead. “So… are you like her? A vampire?! What’s your game?”

The girl named Cass laughed mirthlessly. “My game is one with no moves left. I chose the white queen, knowing her to be a cruel one, in the hope that she would forestall greater darkness. Now the black queen has captured this simple pawn of fate, and the whole board is all but lost.”

“That didn’t make a lick of sense!” protested Star, still not letting her wand down.

“I am afraid it will, in time, Queen Star,” Cass added. “But you have little to fear from me now, I have resigned myself to the inevitable.”

“I am not a queen!” Star protested. Part of her felt that she had to add ‘yet’. But another part of her reminded herself that she might wish to avoid it altogether, if she could. Particularly given that, on top of every sucky thing about being queen, it apparently also meant she couldn’t be with Marco, and Jackie. Not without carefully weighting how every single person in Mewni might feel about what, if you asked Star, was none of their damn business!

The green-eyed girl turned back, looking surprised for the first time. She regarded Star for a good long while, like she were reading the pages of a book rather than the face of a person. “Yes. Perhaps not a queen yet. Without a proper coronation, that title might yet be another’s. I could advise you to not leave the space open for those who would usurp it, for they are each and all more overtly cruel than yourself. Their depredations would only compound with those greater ones, which you can’t possibly prevent. But it matters not in truth. Your kingdom, and more than your kingdom, is already lost…”

There was something in that voice which made Star feel like a cold wind had passed through her. This whole conversation was getting more disturbing by the minute, and there was something about the way the other girl spoke, that made her think the warnings in her words were not idle threats. They didn’t really sound like threats at all, in fact. The brunette spoke regretfully, almost with pity. Star wasn’t sure she wanted to keep hearing this, and at the same time, something told her it would be unwise not to listen on.
But Cass spoke no more, and Star didn’t feel she was an immediate threat, and so they walked in silence. They arrived to the top of the stairs before the mewman princess could think of any more questions to ask.

----

“Well, what in the world took you so long, B-Fly!?” shouted a grinning Pony Head, rushing to meet them the instant Star kicked down the door. Cass, holding the key she had just retrieved from her pocket, simply sighed in resignation.

“Pony Head!” yelled Star back, a broad smile extending from one cheek to the other, her worries forgotten in the elation of finding her bestie safe and sound. “Are you ok? Did she hurt you?”

“Oh, B-Fly, she tried!” Pony Head assured her, then grinned proudly and winked at her. “But I was way too tough for her, gurrl!”

“Nobody tried anything. Princess White sent her two lieutenants for us, and they simply muzzled her and encased me in a jar,” corrected Glintwisp, huffing indignantly at that later fact, “and then they dragged us here... Wait! Watch out, princess Star! One of them is behind you!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Star waved the pixie princess’ warnings off. “She is with me. Says she is not a vampire. I believe her.”

“A what?! Why would she be a vampire? Girl, you get into the craziest troubles...” Pony Head seemed to think for a moment after saying that. But only, it shall be noted, after... well, second craziest! After me! But tell me, B-fly, what happened out there?! It’s a shame we missed it! You must have really whooped that witch’s ass!”

“She was a vampire, not a witch,” clarified Star, helpfully. “And well, it wasn’t me. The one who kicked her ass was Jackie... I mean, Prince Jack,” she corrected herself, a smidgen too late, as she looked at her green-eyed guide. Sure, both other princess had met Jackie on Mewni, and knew the truth, but it wouldn’t do to have their former, and perhaps current, enemy, to hear something like that. “You should have seen he... him! S...He was awesome!”

“Yes,” Cass confirmed, “the maid in the knightly attire was remarkably nimble, beyond all which could have been fairly expected.”

Well, so much for Jackie’s secret! The brunette princess’ tone was laced with mockery thick enough for even Star to catch on. She stressed the word ’maid’, as well as ’fairly’. However it was she knew things, it seemed a matter of fact that she knew well the truth behind ’Prince Jack’ and his gifts.

“What? You mean Monkey Face slayed a vampire?” Pony Head whistled, or whinnied, or something in between, genuinely impressed. “I don’t say this often, but those two earth turds are not half bad... But like, don’t ever tell them I said that!”

After that, Pony Head finally managed to stay quiet long enough for Star to tell her and Glintwisp all about Jackie’s duel with White. Cass simply walked out to the window, looking outside, seemingly disinterested. Or, perhaps, in deep thought. It hadn’t sounded to the mewman as if the vampire princess was her friend but, even so, the green-eyed girl might not have been all that comfortable with Star’s retelling of White’s defeat, or with the loud cheers and gasps from the other two princesses.

Star, for herself, felt happier the more she told the story. As she spoke about the human girl cutting
a bloody gash through the night creature’s shoulder, or piercing its chest, she felt a burst of pride and excitement spread from her own heart. She felt joy in describing how the girl kicked away White’s sword, then picked her own back from her opponent’s body and held her to surrender with the blade against her neck. As she recounted Jackie’s final victory, Star felt... she felt invincible. And well, she felt a little turned on, actually.

Wait, no, that wasn’t right. She wasn’t into Jackie! So why did she...? oh. Oh! Duh. Star knew what Jackie had planned the moment she took off with Marco in her arms. She should have been ready, she should have expected it. But she had been busy thinking a million other things about them, and worrying about getting to Pony Head, and so, she forgot. She forgot all about the link!

Now it dawned on her that the pride, and the joy, and the invincibleness - was that a word? - and of course the, well, excitement, she felt, were all Jackie’s own. Or maybe what Marco perceived from Jackie? It wasn’t clear how much of the connection extended to the other human teen, as well as it did to their mutual boyfriend. But if it was hitting her this strongly, now rather than before, it meant that Marco and Jackie had probably just arrived to wherever they eloped to, and were about to… Ok, thinking about it definitely was not helping Star calm down!

“Oh! So she just let her go? Just like that?!” exploded Pony Head as soon as the princess of Mewni got to the end of her tale. “What was Monkey Face thinking?! If it had been me against that White be-yoch, I would have just skewered her with my horn! Like this!” She stabbed the air with a flourish of her head.

Star had been besties with Pony Head long enough to know that no good would come of mentioning that her horn would probably not count as a stake as far as vampires were concerned. Nor would it had been useful to remind her that the reason they were all here was because Pony Head had been here, had been faced with Princess White and her brief reign of terror, and had chosen the rather sensible course of looking for help. It also did not help that Star was beginning to blush, and feel her breath quicken. For the first time, she was regretting her strange connection to Marco.

“Wait, Princess Star, there is a part that doesn’t make sense to me,” Glintwisp observed, flying up to the mewman in an attempt to get her diminutive voice noticed against the background of Pony Head’s ever bolder statements about what she would have done if it had been just her against Snow White. “You said that after Princess White, eh, transformed, that your friend was not able to match her in speed, right? Yet, after you froze time, sorry, slowed time, and she rejected your help, she was suddenly able to land multiple hits, and block without magical shielding too. That doesn’t sound right...”

“What you talking about gurrl?” retorted Star’s bestie. “Clearly she just saw how awesome B-fly was and, trying to not let herself be totally outmatched by my girl here, she rose to the challenge!”

“Well, I think that could be part of it,” Star said, biting her lip, part because she had a confession to make, part because an image of Jackie kissing Marco’s chest had just popped into her mind. “But I might also have interpreted her request, ah, creatively. Like, she asked me for two seconds, so I gave them to her...” her voice turned to a whisper “… in every minute of the fight after that.”

She had sped up Jackie’s own personal time by an extra 1/30th for the reminder of the fight. It wasn’t much of a push at all, the victory was still Jackie’s in the end. At most, Star had only given her the chance to match White’s unnatural speed. It was not much more on top of all the spells she had cast on her in the beginning. But, since she cast that last one during the duel, rather than in advance, it did technically count as cheating. Star glanced at Cass to see if the brunette protested, but she seemed not to notice. Right, she probably knew already. There was something so very
creepy about that girl!

Star couldn’t finish that thought, because that very moment she got a jolt of adrenaline as she felt Marco’s knees hit the floor. She could see, and feel, herself crawling in all fours towards Jackie, through her boyfriend’s eyes, the human girl still dressed in full prince outfit.

“Hey, come think of it, where are Monkey Face and Earth Turd?” pouted Pony Head. Clearly the implications of the mewman cheating in the fight with White had gone right over her floating head. Star loved her best bestie on Mewnie, but sometimes the Cloud Kingdom’s princess could really be rather cloud-headed. “I’d thought they would be with you...”

“Ah,” Star gasped. In her mind, she could see the answer to her bestie’s question way too clearly. For once, Star decided to go with the truth, or something close enough, “Well, Marco and Jackie are dating and, they probably wanted some time alone in private to, like, comfort each other after the fight and stuff...”

“Sure, Star, but, well, aren’t you like their girlfriend too?” Pony Head asked like it was the most blatantly obvious thing in the world.

Glintwisp’s eyes went wide in surprise. Cass stared out of the window, bored.

“What?! No! Yes!” Star scrambled to respond. “Ok, sort of... But, how do you know?”

“Gurrl, it is kinda obvious from seeing the three of you. I mean, those two go without saying, of course,” the other princess explained. “But, like, you and Earth Turd had gotten into a fight before I dragged you both here and you patched stuff up - no need to thank me! I am nice like that! - and it was obviously a boyfriend-girlfriend kind of fight, and it’s obvious Monkey Face knows about that, so... you three got one of those, eh, arrangements, no? You can tell me! I won’t judge, B-fly! I mean, I would have gone with guy-me-guy or, at worst, me-guy-guy, but...”

So much for cloud-headed.

“Well, yeah, ok, it is something like that,” Star conceded. “It’s just a thing Jackie came up with, and so I get Marco, and she also gets Marco.”

For example, right this very moment, Jackie was getting to undress Marco as he laid on the bed. She was pushing the pink dress Star conjured for him and carelessly throwing it to the floor, and Marco was just looking up at the human girl with nervous anticipation.

“So, with that situation,...” Pony Head tried, “... you don’t feel left out sometimes, B-Fly? Like, who gets him the most?”

“We both do!” Star replied. Except, of course, Jackie got him now. Like, right now. Like she was plunging herself onto his cock right this very second, and Star both knew that and could feel it! It made the princess both indescribably happy and also worried in a vague diffuse manner. And the fact that it made her feel worried made her feel guilty in turn, like she was failing to live up to her end of the bargain. After all, last night it had been her and Marco, with Jackie probably within earshot, and she had not given any sign of resenting that!

“Yeah, but,” Pony Head insisted, “who gets him the mostest?”

“Jackie,” Star admitted. “No! We, we both do. And, like, I think we actually spend more time together than the two of them. I mean, we live together...”

“Right,” said her friend, “but, like, it doesn’t quite feel that way, right B-fly?”
It didn’t. Jackie had been with him first. She had gone with him to the place that Star had wanted so much to take him to, the dimension with all the hanging silk ribbons. She was with him now, and it was the two of them who had been prince and princess during this whole charade, while Star took the role of the friend, just as she did at school!

The worst part was that Star knew she was being unfair. Jackie had been with Marco first, and she had gotten him and Star out on their first date! She had gone to the pillow’s and silk dimension with him because Star had sent them there! She had him now, because Star had had him yesterday. And she had taken Prince Jack’s role... to fit into the adventures Star and Marco took for granted.

But still, it sometimes felt like Star was playing second fiddle to Jackie as far as Marco was concerned. At least, that’s what a petty and mean voice inside her head often told her. It did not help to see them now, in her mind eye. Jackie riding him and he moaning in pleasure, in a way that Star had never heard him moan when they were together. He didn’t get lost in pleasure quite that way, not with her. Was that a new thing? Or was it always like that when he was with Jackie? Star couldn’t remember.

She often found that her link with Marco made the situation more acceptable. She got to feel good when he felt good, and thus became even more open to cherish the pleasure he got with Jackie. But right now, feeling this as she had to make an effort not to show it, as she tried to convince Pony Head that she didn’t sometimes feel jealous about Jackie still, well, it was most definitely not helping.

“You know, B-fly,” her bestie suddenly spoke, sounding surprisingly subdued for Pony Head, “I think it’s true you both get him the mostest. Like, it looks like that to me. But I don’t feel that’s how you feel. You know? And, like, the facts are one thing, but the way you feel about them is the truth too! You get what I am saying?”

“To hide from one’s heart is to fear one’s own shadow,” Cass spoke, without bothering to turn back from the window.

“Yeah, totally, totally... But, I know the way I feel, and I feel great!” smiled Star, unconvincingly.

Privately, she thought that maybe her bestie had a point. It didn’t mean she wanted something other than what the three of them had. She had been willing to face up to her mom, and her entire kingdom, for her right to continue things exactly as they were with the two human teens. But perhaps it didn’t hurt to admit that, sometimes - not always, but sometimes - she still couldn’t be as perfectly chill about the whole thing as Jackie seemed to be. Now, the question was, should she tell Jackie that? Could she tell Marco?

She tried to be as discreet as possible, as the force of the other two teens’ climax hit her through the link. A gasp still escaped her lips, drawing looks of puzzlement from Pony Head and Glintwisp, and what seemed almost like a reproachful look from the green-eyed girl.

“The flipped lovers will be joining us soon,” Cass spoke. “But, then again, Her Majesty already knows that.”

Whatever else the future had in store for her, Star felt she would undoubtedly be glad to leave St. Olga and all of its creepy new princesses behind. The party below seemed less and less attractive by the minute.

----

Jackie was glad that they found Star still inside tower three. She was doubly glad that Marco had
found a way to get there which did not go out of the building. She was particularly happy they didn’t have to traverse the crowded courtyard.

She did not wish to be seen by any of the princesses of St. O’s now, mostly because passing as Prince Jack had become rather difficult, now that the buttons of her vest and shirt were both in tatters. Not to mention: whatever magical force had been binding her breasts flat underneath was also gone. She hadn’t even realized that that was something included in her transformation, until now. In retrospect, it was rather obvious; a shirt and vest alone should not have been able to disguise her gender. Not that Jackie was one to brag about something like that, of course.

“Hey, Star!” she shouted as soon as they found their friend.

“Hey, Jackie!” the princess of Mewni yelled back as she turned around, smiling at them. Jackie gave her an apologetic half smile. Then the mewman spotted their boyfriend, “Marco!”

Star jumped to hug him, and Marco held her tightly in return. It warmed Jackie’s heart, every time. She also felt quite happy to notice that Star didn’t seem at all bothered by their spur of the moment celebratory escapade. Sometimes it was hard to tell with the princess, the way she always put a happy face either way, but Jackie felt she had gotten better at telling when Star’s contentment was sincere. And she thought, and hoped, that was the case today.

After all, this whole thing had been possible only because of Star. How often you met a friend who took you on an inter-dimensional adventure, gave you freaking super-powers and then let you use those super-powers to literally sweep the boy she liked off his feet? Jackie was reputed to be a cool girl, and she would admit she had her moments, but she had to agree with Marco’s frequent declarations: Star was the most amazing friend anyone could wish for! And, while Jackie was most lucky to have a rather wonderful boyfriend, she also felt quite lucky of having made such a great friend as well.

“Hey, Monkey Face!” Pony Head came out right after Star, giving Jackie a derisive glare. “Heard you are a skank!”

Jackie rolled her eyes at that, “Heard you got jailed, Horse Head. Shame we cannot just keep you locked up!”

Pony Head huffed. “But, like, glad you are not dead and all...” she finally admitted with an embarrassed turn of her head.

“Same,” conceded Jackie, with a chuckle and a knowing nod.

“Awwww, now we are all besties!” shouted Star with a huge grin, as she finally let go of their mutual boyfriend. Both Jackie and Pony Head made faces that made it quite clear that the mewman was being far too optimistic on that count. “But, well,” Star continued, “I think it is time for all us to head back to Mewni, and from there to Earth!”

“You don’t have to say it twice,” Marco agreed. “I have had enough adventure for a pretty long while. Are the girls going to be ok without us, though?”

“We can take it from here, Princess Marco, ma’am,” Glintwisp flew up to him. “We will be alright. It was an honor to meet you and we shall now be doubly in your debt!”

“You are in nobody’s debt, my wayward sister!” Princess Marco replied. Then, in his normal boy tone, “But, eh, you know I am not really a princess, right?”

“Of course, Princess Marco,” Glintwisp replied with a bow.
“So,” Jackie felt she had to ask, “how about her?”

She pointed at the brunette princess. She had noticed her a while back, as she bantered with Pony Head. But, since Star seemed to be ok with her around, Jackie had figured she was no threat. That said, she was still one of White’s goons. Not being a threat to Star Butterfly didn’t mean she was not a threat to a crowd of other, less magical, princesses. That was Prince Jack’s own expert judgment, as the second liberator of St. O’s.

“As the black queen leaves, so my role here shall be ended. None of the princesses you leave behind has anything to fear from me,” Cass spoke. “There is only one task left for me to do, and it shall be done soon. Once the veil is lifted, I shall give voice to the will of the heavens.”

Jackie shot Star a questioning look, and the mewman simply shrugged.

“Well, that’s settled then. I don’t know you girls,” Marco spoke then. “But I am starving for some nachos!”

He held his pair of magical scissors in the air. A pair that, if Jackie was to believe Star and Marco’s stories - and, given what she had just experienced, she was quite ready to believe just about anything - he had obtained after sixteen years of grueling hardships in a foreign dimension, in pursuit of a sadistic evil sorceress who also happened to be Star mom’s good friend. Those scissors were perhaps Marco’s most valuable possession, and second only to Star’s magic wand. For a moment Jackie wondered if she would ever end up owning her own magical artifact if she hung out with the two of them long enough.

“Nachos sound awesome, Diaz,” she agreed. “Well, what are we waiting for? There is no place like home!” She clicked the heels of her princely boots and her boyfriend groaned, even as he smiled just a little bit.

Marco extended the scissors out in front of himself and cut through the air in a single theatrical motion.

Nothing happened.

His smile turned to a frown as he opened and closed the scissors in mid air, to no avail. He brought them up to his face and looked at them. “Star... my name! It is gone from the blades!”

----

“What?! Marco, let me see,” Star took the scissors from Marco and looked them over. Indeed, his name seemed to have faded out of them. This wasn’t right. She had never seen a pair of dimensional scissors fail to open a portal, even on the first try. Were his dimensional scissors on the frizz? Could dimensional scissors even be on the frizz? She closed her eyes and focused, dipping down into herself, stirring the magic around her, and particularly the magic within the metal blades. She found none. No trace of power could be felt, none beyond that which lingered within mundane materials. “Marco, I can’t sense any of Hekapoo’s stuff in these. Are you sure they are the right scissors?”

“Of course they are the right scissors, Star,” spoke Marco. He didn’t sound angry, but he seemed scared, almost panicking.

He took the scissors back from Star and tried again to open a portal with them, to no avail. Marco had always been very careful with those scissors, ever since he came back from his quest for them. He would lend them to her without question, of course, but otherwise he never let them out of his
sight. Star remembered how she felt right after losing the book of spells. Then she thought back to when she thought she had just been forced to destroy her magic wand forever. The realization hit her then, of just what exactly might be going through her best friend’s mind. Oh crap!

She put a hand on the boy’s shoulder and shot him a reassuring smile. “It’s alright Marco, it will be fine. I don’t know what’s happening, but I am sure we will find a way to repair those, or get Hekapoo to forge another pair. After all, you already earned them, it’s not like she can say no to that!” At least, Star hoped that was the case.

“But, eh, Star,” Jackie interrupted. “How are we going to get back without the scissors?”

“Mmmhmm,” Star thought for a while, wand against her cheek. Maybe she could do something with her magic. But, well, there was a reason even Mewni royalty used dimensional scissors to travel around the multiverse. What if she managed to open a portal but they didn’t end up where she thought they would? Or somehow got there only half-way? Or it was instead a twisted shadow of the world they had left behind? Or... No, dimensional magic without instructions and without scissors sounded like a bad idea. It was the kind of bad idea even Star Butterfly wouldn’t try if they had any other option. “Wait, I got it! Pony Head, you still have a pair of scissors, right?”

“Of course, B-fly!” Pony Head said, sticking out her tongue and showing her second pair of stolen scissors this year.

Star took them from her, and cut through the air in front of the both of them. Nothing happened. She examined the scissors the same way she had inspected Marco’s, but no magic was to be found in these either.

“These aren’t working either,” she observed, frustrated. “Pony Head, you said Miss Heinous had a whole basket of scissors?”

They resolved to go to the former headmistress’ room. Cass, Pony Head and Glintwisp showed the way, while the two humans and Star followed. In there, they found more than a dozen other dimensional scissors, all of them equally useless.

“Wait, I got another idea!” shouted Star, forcing herself to smile as she looked at the deflated faces around her.

Marco had been trying his best to help, testing the other scissors. But now he just cradled his own in both hands, looking at them with a sad expression. Jackie tried to comfort him with a hug and reassuring words, but Star could tell she was getting worried too. She knew the human girl must be thinking about the possibility that they might not be able to go back to Earth. It was a reasonable fear, particularly considering this was her first time outside her own dimension. But Star was not ready to give up just yet.

She looked around. “Of course! There!”

She took off the white sheet covering the mirror. Because, of course, Miss Heinous had to have had a mirror. How else would she know which kids to expect from their parents? Come to think about it, many of the princess’ rooms also had mirrors. All they had to do was call her mom, and she would figure out a way to come fetch them!

Or, even better, they could call Hekapoo herself and ask her what the hell had gone wrong with Marco’s scissors and the others here. Now that she thought about it, that was probably the best course of action. Given Star’s last interaction with the two of them, she felt Hekapoo might perhaps be more sympathetic to getting them all out of here with minimal fuss. After all, her mom probably
didn’t even know they had left Mewni, and wouldn’t be thrilled to hear so.

“Mirror mirror on the wall, call Hekapoo!” Star commanded. Three dots appeared on top of the crystal surface, as her reflection and that of her friends disappeared from it.

’CALL SUBJECT IS UNREACHABLE’ showed the mirror’s surface.

The princess stared at the words for what seemed like minutes.

“Star,” Jackie suggested, cautiously. “Maybe call your mom, then?”

“Sigh. Yeah, yeah, alright...” Star already knew what the next step was, and she suspected Jackie knew she knew. But Jackie also probably knew Moon and her had, well, unresolved issues to discuss, as Star’s mother would put it. “Mirror mirror on the wall, call Mom!”

’CALL SUBJECT IS UNREACHABLE’

“This is bad, Star,” Marco finally spoke. “This is really, really, bad. And it’s all my fault...”

“How is this your fault?” interjected Jackie.

“Well, my scissors should have gotten us out of here, or else I shouldn’t have been so confident in them, and planned a backup, or...” Marco seemed to realize he was being silly, for once, “… ok, it just feels like my fault.”

“Maybe it is mine,” said Jackie smiling faintly. “Maybe it had to do with defeating White, or with not killing her, and now we are all sealed in this dimension with her?”

“No, Marco, Jackie. It is my fault,” spoke Star in a resolute tone. Her face turned into a scowl. “It is always, ultimately, my fault. I got you two to Mewnie first and now here, and I am going to get you both back to Earth. But first, we need to know what is happening, and I think I know just the way...”

Her eyes narrowed, and she could see in the now inactive mirror that she looked just a little bit scary. Marco and Jackie seemed nervous, but not too concerned, while Cass went pale and scrambled to get her back against the wall, as far from Star as she could without leaving the room.

In retrospect, Star shouldn’t have missed that warning sign.

However, right now, the princess knew just what she had to do. She had to know what exactly had happened to the scissors or to this place, why the mirror was also not working, and where the hell was Hekapoo during all this. She began the only spell that could offer her answers now, the one spell which could show her the hidden truth.

“I summon the All-Seeing Eye...”

A gust of chilly wind began swirling around the room, as if the windows and door were not closed, as if the sky was not sunny and clear. It lifted her hair up in the air around her. She focused, with all her might, on her desire to learn what was going on, to find a way back home.

“Eh, Star, are you sure? That spell...” asked Marco, nervously. He had seen her cast it once before, back when she used it to search for Glossaryck. It had led to a pretty awkward talk, where Star had tried to explain what she knew about what made dark magic, well, dark. It wasn’t much. Marco had noticed that. “Is it safe?” he added.
Probably not. But it’s not like they had a whole lot of options. Besides, Star had used it before, more times than Marco knew, without anything too bad happening.

“... to tear a hole into the sky...”

Her half crystal star glowed bright green. Cass gasped. A sense of dread began growing in the back of Star’s mind. That sensation was new. She had cast the All-Seeing Eye spell many times before, and it did often feel just slightly wrong. A sensation she had attributed either to the purposes she tended to use it for, or to the fact that it was dark magic after all.

“...reveal to me that which is hidden...”

But this time the sensation was different. It was not just slightly wrong, there was something awful about the magic that was flowing through her wand now, and through her body. Alarm bells rang in Star’s mind. But she found, to her surprise, that she could not stop now, even if she tried.

“... unveil to me what is forbidden!”

A huge purple vortex opened up before all of them, tendrils of green energy slowly creeping from within, the view on the other end of the portal a dark haze. Star tried to shut down the spell, to drop her wand, to dip down. But nothing worked. She was paralyzed in place, and from the looks of it, so were her friends. After a long tense instant, the view on the other side of the portal became clear.

It was Earth. More specifically, it was Marco’s house. Even more specifically, it was her room. On the other side of the portal, a perfect copy of Star was looking at them upside down, as she laid on the floor with her feet on top of the edge of the bed, playing with her wand, moving it forward and backward slowly.

Star tried to open her mouth to speak to her idle look-alike, but she could not even move her own lips. It was like having her mind pulled into slowed time by someone else, the way she had done to Jackie earlier, only even more restricting. She could barely move her eyes around, glancing at her human friends to see the shocked expressions they wore. Then, she saw the image inside the portal jump to sit in the bed, and realized to her horror what she was seeing. She didn’t know, she never knew, that the All-Seeing Eye could show her scenes far away in time as well as space. But why this? Why now?!

“I summon the All-Seeing Eye, to tear a hole into the sky,” spoke the other Star.

She could hardly believe she was seeing this again. It was wrong. A shameful memory under the best of circumstances, and even worse under these circumstances. Marco and Jackie were here with her! If they found out... no, oh no! Not like this!

“Reveal to me that which is hidden.” She saw the Star in the portal’s wand glow emerald as a second portal opened within the first. “Unveil to me what is forbidden.”

“Well, Marco, what do you think?” came Jackie’s voice from somewhere outside either vortex. The past version of the princess adjusted the portal, so that they were all now looking, through two different sets of shadowy clouds, at Jackie standing in only her bra, that fateful night, seemingly so long ago. Star looked at her friend, her real present friend, frozen in place with her, and saw her eyes grow wide with surprise. Oh no! no! No, no, no, no, no! This wasn’t happening!

But it did, all of it! They remained held in place by the spell as the smaller vortex showed Marco and Jackie’s first intimacies, their private jokes, their awkwardness (mostly his, but sometimes hers
as well). The larger portal showed Star, gazing at them with an expression that she now felt looked too... well, too eager, perverted even. She felt ashamed, and disgusted at herself. A glance at Jackie and Marco told her they were both shocked, and confused, and going pale.

“Do you, do you do this often? Invite boys up, I mean?”

“No. First time ever. You?”

“No! I mean, yes! I mean no! I mean, first time too. With girls, I mean. Not with boys. I mean, not that I have done it with boys either...”

“... I kinda practiced on Star’s bras...”

“Oh, Marco... you are doing... a-mazing!”

“You know, it is better if you play with them. Like this,”

“Eh, Jackie. How far are we planning on taking this?”

“You know where my mouth just was, right?”

“Well, if you had said you were with me only for the sex that would also have been good for my ego.”

“By the way, Safe Kid, do you have any condoms around?”

“Just fuck already!” Star heard herself yell, through the portal.

Had she really said that aloud? If her face hadn’t been pale as a corpse with guilt and fear, it would have been boiling red with embarrassment.

Worse, she knew what was coming. Soon they were all watching Marco entering Jackie, trusting into her as they both sweat and moaned. They were watching Star herself laying on the bed, being fucked by some magical echo of Marco. It was beyond bizarre, and so embarrassing that Star wanted her wand to explode right there and then and erase them all from the face of whatever dimension St. O’s was in. But, more than anything, she felt guilt, guilt at having seen that, and at now showing it, against her own will, to the other two teens. And to Pony Head, Glintwisp and Cass as well!

Once it was finally done, Star could only manage to look at the floor in shame. But the Star in the vision had not averted her eyes, and so she could not claim to be as ashamed at what she had done as she was at having been caught.

“Marco... this is probably weird timing, but can I ask you a question about Star?” she heard the Jackie in the mirror ask. Fortunately, the image faded out then, not showing Star creeping in on their private conversation as well as their first time. At last, it was over.

Except, instead of the spell fading and their movement being restored, the scene simply changed. It showed her and Marco, older Marco, floating in the clouds. It showed Hekapoo’s smiling face for only a moment, and then the image broke like shattered glass.

It changed then to a dark night outside, of even darker implications. A small river flowing under a stone bridge.

“Then, Star...” she heard Tom’s voice through the portal, “... get on your knees.”
And the spell showed them Star fellating Tom, and at the same time flashes of Jackie doing the same to Marco, back in their bed. It didn’t show a continuous scene now, but jumped between one and the other, recreating that awful night as Star had experienced it, where she saw the two humans half of the time as she herself had sex with her ex-boyfriend. In the end, the spell showed all four climaxing together. Each of their faces appeared in turn, large and clear through the vortex, as they cried out.

“Staaar!” she heard Tom grunt, hungrily.

“Maaarco!” she heard Jackie moan, joyously.

“Staaar!” she heard Marco shout, lovingly.

“Maaarco!” she heard herself cry out, wishfully.

Jackie’s face, the real Jackie, the current Jackie, looked horrified. Marco seemed hurt and confused. Star’s eyes were crying through the paralysis, it was painful to force each tear out, but impossible to contain them.

The show did not end there, but it showed bits and pieces of every time Star had been with Marco, and of every time she had sensed or seen him and Jackie through the link, including this very morning. Most of the time, it was clear Star was not only aware of it, but actively seeking the link, closing her eyes to concentrate, looking for a quiet space... touching herself. They might yet believe the truth: that she did not control those visions, that she could not fully shut them down, that she had not actively cast the spell to spy on them again. But there was no way she could convince them that she hadn’t known, or that she hadn’t enjoyed what she saw, that she hadn’t repeatedly violated their privacy, and lied to them by omission.

The images in the portal became very different now, and in a way even more disturbing. A web of emerald strings, bright as lightning, constricting someone she couldn’t quite see. Star’s book of spells burning. Glossaryck burning! Wait, was that Ludo being crushed under a stone pillar? The forest of certain death, flowing beneath the view of the vortex. Butterfly Castle.

Star felt anger. A hate that burned cold like nothing she had ever felt before, and it took her just an instant to realize that it was not, could not be, part of her own feelings. Something was angry at her, angry that it was being sought, spied on, touched. Something that had not cared at all when exposing all of Star’s deepest and darkest secrets, but which would not allow her to peer into its own. The Seeing-Eye portal came crashing down, and Star felt a sensation like being punched in the stomach... by Princess White’s rock-shattering fists.

She hit the wall and collapsed onto the ground, her wand falling down in the middle of the room and rolling away from her, finally inert. Every inch of her body felt like an army of ants were crawling over it. She could not move, could not speak, could hardly breathe. Everyone else seemed to become unfrozen at just that time.

“Star...!” she heard Marco and Jackie shout in unison.

“... are you ok?!” asked Marco.

“... what the hell was that?!” yelled Jackie, trembling. Her eyes sharp even as they welled up with moisture.

“Ah, ahem,” Pony Head flew up in front of Star, “that was, that was clearly fake! Something went funny with the spell... right, B-fly? And, and...”
“That wasn’t fake,” stated Jackie. Her tone suddenly ice-cold. Her expression rigid and controlled, even as tears flowed from her eyes.

“Jackie, ah, maybe right now is not the best time. We can ask after we are sure she is alright...” noted Marco. But Star noticed he also seemed to avoid looking at her. His face was also red with embarrassment. Or with anger?

“No, Marco!” yelled Jackie. “She is fine. I know very well what Star can take. She can answer now! Please, step aside, Pony Head. I am sorry, but this is between the three of us...”

“We should go,” said Glintwisp to the unicorn princess. The floating head looked around and nodded apprehensively in response, and they made their way towards the exit.

Star felt herself recover, ever so slowly, “Jackie, oh Jackie, I am so sorry, I never meant for you to...”

“See any of that?!” asked Jackie. “Know that you have been spying on me this whole time?! Honestly, Star, that makes it worse. I feel... I can’t even describe it... used? Toyed with? Violated? Come on, I trusted you! Trusted you enough to open up about how I felt, to want us to be friends and... and... you know... to be alright with you and Marco? To feel safe about you dating him too. Trusted the both of you... I... why didn’t you tell us?”

As the physical pain began to subside, the weight of her guilt, and the realization that she had really hurt Jackie, quickly outpaced the magical resonance as the source of Star’s anguish. “Jackie, I am sorry, I am really really sorry. But... would you have said something in my place? I can’t even begin to think how...”

“Yes, Star, I would have,” Jackie responded without a thought. “Marco would have too. Come on Star, I shouldn’t have to explain to you how all that stuff is really not cool!”

Star murmured something in response, it was a lame apology, and she knew it was so even before she was done saying it.

“What was that?” asked Jackie.

“I said,” Star repeated, ashamed, “that I wouldn’t have gone out with Marco, or ended up in this weird-awesome relationship, if not for... well... for what you just saw...”

“Star,” Jackie looked down at the floor, suddenly in a calmer, but not exactly friendlier, tone. “You could have just asked. At any time, you could have asked. I know it wouldn’t have been a normal thing to do, and I can see why that would have been scary. But, well, it wouldn’t have been like this! It would have been something Marco and I at least could consider, and agree to. Rather than us having been exposed for your entertainment, without our knowledge, without being asked...”

Star blinked. Had it truly been as simple as that? If she had spoken with Marco, or with Jackie, would all this have happened, even without the link?

“And, Star... even after that, you could have said something afterwards, that day at the diner, perhaps, or any of the afternoons we were all at Marco’s home... Ah, but maybe...” she glanced at Marco, and he simply shook his head. He was still looking down at the floor, silently. “I see. Why? Why didn’t you say anything Star? To either of us? I trusted you. Marco trusted you. Why didn’t you trust us?”

“I do trust you!” protested Star. “I was, I was ashamed, and weirded out. I wanted to tell you, but, but...” She realized that the boy hadn’t said a word in a while, “Marco, yesterday you said that you
were fine with learning my secrets whenever you learned them, right? That I didn’t have to tell you
all back then? That it was ok if some of it was a surprise?”

Star knew, right after she had said that, that it was the wrong thing to say. She hadn’t asked Marco
how he felt, she had just asked for forgiveness. No, not even that. She had called him on his
promise for blanket absolution, without first even asking what he thought of... of everything he had
just seen.

“Star, I...” he begun. Then he paused. He looked at the mewman princess, crying in the floor, then
at the human girl trembling with anger and hurt. “You were watching us, right? Every time? This
morning too?”

Star nodded, words stuck in her throat.

“Then, are we not allowed secrets as well? Only you?” Star felt hollow inside. Marco didn’t sound
angry. It was much worse than that. He sounded distant. And he was still not looking at her. He
walked up to Jackie and held her tightly. Then he spoke, evenly, “can we talk about all this later?
We still need to find a way home.”

But Star didn’t want to go home anymore. She wanted to go back in time, to the moment before she
cast the All Seeing-Eye spell again, or maybe further back than that, to the time at which she might
have told Marco and Jackie of the link, without coming off as someone who disrespected and
toyed with those she loved, without being a liar, and a creep. Jackie had been right, Marco would
have told her, immediately, if it had been him seeing her through the link and he knew what it was.
The human girl would have likely told her as well. What did it say, about Star, that she hadn’t?

Cass walked slowly towards her. Honestly, the mewman had forgotten about the last remaining
princess in the room. She hadn’t left when Pony Head and Glintwisp had. Now, the brunette was
almost in front of her, and she extended a finger to point accusingly at Star. Her eyes had rotated up
in their sockets, so that she could no longer see the green irises. When the words came out of her
mouth, it didn’t sound like her voice at all. It didn’t sound human. It was a chorus of deep echoing
voices that came out of the frail looking girl.

Star understood then, why Cass knew things she had never been told, and why she spoke in riddles.
Mewni had legends, as did Earth, about vampires. Mewni also had legends, as did Earth, about
seers and prophecies.

“Behold the dark queen ascending,
her will the thread of fate unraveling.
Behold the force of evil incarnate,
borne of deepest heart’s desire.”

Thus spoke the girl called Cass, as she kept her finger pointed at Star, declaring her evil beyond
reckoning. The words felt true, in a piercing way. They were not true because they were
perceptive. Nor even because Star herself was already questioning her own moral compass. They
were true because they were prophecy, true in a fatalistic sense, and Star knew that, even if she
wasn’t sure how she knew it.

“Only surrender may undo the shadow,
but the price shall be too high to pay.
In the end the world itself must shatter,
and death shall be the one to claim her.”

Star rose to her feet in one jump. She could not stand it any more: the unearthly voice of the other
princess, the looks of confusion in her human friends’ eyes, the guilt about what she had done, the horror about what she might one day do, about what she was just told she would become. Without bothering to even get her wand back, the princess of mewni, the “force of evil incarnate”, took off running out of that dreadful room.

As she fled, the thing that broke her heart was that, this time, she didn’t even hear Marco call after her.

Chapter End Notes

She's a princess winning battles
Through the break of dawn
Don't worry when it's night
‘Cause she will keep the lights on
Ohhhh, there goes a shining star...

Coming up next: Chapter 18: But Just to Be Certain, I’ll Say it Again

See the first comment below, to find out that which is hidden, to unveil what is forbidden
Chapter 18: But Just to Be Certain, I’ll Say it Again

A girl with no friends, and no loved ones left, skulked through the bleak cliffs surrounding Saint Olga’s Reform School for Wayward Princesses. Unhurriedly she made her way among the thick and prickly tangles of dead tree branches. As she did so, the evil child only thought of what had gone wrong, what she would do differently if she had only another chance. She had been thinking, and fleeing, for hours. Now the sky was dark once more, but the end of the day did not erase the damage done.

As her mind was balancing, for the eleventh time, the ledger of all of her mistakes, she heard a sobbing sound from just ahead. Cautiously, she approached the source of the noise. It came from a small valley clearing. A vulnerable position. Or perhaps a trap. Not wanting to take any chances, the girl got only as far as the edge of the dried woods, and with a swift movement jumped atop one particularly tall, particularly sturdy, elm. As it landed, her lithe body made nary a sound, none that would be heard over the ceaseless weeping.

The figure below was familiar to her. Even so, it took her a moment to recognize her now, without the long horns and the ridiculous fake eye-patch. The sniveling blond mess had curled herself into a ball in the middle of the clearing, and was likely in the process of crying herself to sleep. She could see her hands bracing her knees, as she shivered in the freezing night wind. Perched atop the tree, Princess White smiled a long wicked smirk. Star Butterfly had no wand on her person.

It would have been easy, and oh so satisfying, to drink the mewman princess dry of her sweet young blood. A palliative for her hunger, and for her bruised pride. But White recalled promising to leave the other princess alone, as part of the terms of her surrender to Prince Jack, the giant killer. White was a creature of the told story, a being of tale and myth, and she knew the traps fate and legend usually put in the path of those who violated an important promise.

There was a kind of magics, White knew, which acted like contracts with the world and its powers, and were enforced by potencies far beyond mortal comprehension. Cassandra’s prophecies had
been thus. It was that the reason why she had found the brunette so indispensable an ally, despite her infuriating crypticness. Invoking similar powers, she had managed to stave away the sun from her temporary kingdom, claiming the ancient right of domain. But her domain had been broken the second she declared herself to lose the duel she had accepted to fight for its control. That meant her word and her promises had at least some weight for the ancient powers. It followed then that she should think it twice before seeing herself forswn over a petty act of vengeance.

She had promised to leave Jack, ‘and Princess Marco, and the mewman, and all the princesses of St. Olga’s, alone’. Was there a loophole there? Anything she might try that would count as technically keeping her promise, while achieving the spirit of her revenge? Surely, the child was mewman, and the only one in St O’s, so she could not sneak out of her vow there by claiming its object was ambiguous. If she had sworn to leave her alone, what was there left, that she could do to her with impunity?

While she thought, a second figure entered the clearing, from the 3 o’clock relative to where she kept watch. White ducked and hid further among the dry branches, as she saw a boy approach. It was not Jack, and certainly no princess.

“Hey, Star... are you alright?” the boy asked.

White noted the concern in his voice. A friend of the mewman perhaps? Well, now that she thought of it, killing her friends did certainly match the wording of a promise ‘to leave her alone’, quite nicely. Ah, the beauty of poetic irony! The vampire princess grinned at the thought. She coiled herself over the tree, ready tostrike at Star’s friend, to deprive the other princess of his company, to multiply her misery without touching a golden hair of her head.

She did not attack.

It took her a moment of hesitation, a second to appraise the newcomer, to decide firmly against that first plan. For even if you were a princess of skin cold as snow, and lips red as blood, and ancient darkness of fairy tale lore, it was nevertheless unwise to attempt to prey on a boy with skin of gravestone tint, and burning red coals for eyes, and long fiendish horns. No, it was not wise at all to ambush a demon.

----

“Tom...?” Star looked up at him in surprise, her eyes red from crying. A moment later, she turned her dulled gaze back to the floor, as if he weren’t there. She continued whimpering, more softly, but no less sorrowfully, than before.

She seemed so sad, and so defeated. The demon prince could not recall ever seeing her in such a state, not even the night of... No. He forced himself to think of anything but that. This was already going to be awkward enough as it was. For once in his life, Tom wanted to be the ex Star deserved, to be something to her other than her biggest regret, her biggest mistake.

“Star,” he spoke. He felt the urge to call her ‘Starship’ and squashed that feeling with all the wrath of the Astray One himself. “I... heard what happened, some of it. Do you want to talk?”

“No,” Star replied. “Marco hates me now, and Jackie hates me now, and... and I hate you.”

To hear that, spoken so plainly, hurt almost as much as that damned anger spell had back then, the day of the concert. In some ways, it hurt even more. But now it was not the time for him to indulge his ever-burning anger, or his own self-pity. Tom breathed deeply, and kept his temper in check, without bothering to count this time. He just didn’t have the time for that. Instead, he made himself
to suppress his inner fire, through force of will alone.

“Star, Jackie is, well, she is angry, but I don’t believe she hates you,” Tom spoke softly, as he sat besides Star and cautiously draped an arm around her. She did not react. He knew well enough that it was more of an indicator of how apathetic she felt right now, rather than any sign that she welcomed his touch. Still, he couldn’t help but feel happy to be holding her, then angry at himself that he still felt so.

Tom forced himself to stay the course. He had promised, before coming out to look for Star, that he would not lie, he would not plot, he would not manipulate. He had promised that he would not put any moves on Star, no matter what, that he was to be here out of concern, and out to help the mewman, as any friend would. A friend and nothing more, if the princess was willing to accept even that from him. It went against his nature, the same way calm went against his nature. And yet, he had long ago mastered calm, nonchalantness, at least most of the time. It took constant effort, but it was effort he was willing to undertake.

“And I know Marco doesn’t hate you. He...” The words dried his throat, like puking dense burning lava, “… he loves you, Star.”

“He hates me, Tom!” yelled Star, tossing his arm off of her and turning her back towards him. “And he is right to do so! Guess you have also heard about me being evil, no? Since you seem to know everything that has happened to me lately!?”

She sounded angry. Anger was good. It was much better than hollow defeated sadness. Maybe what Star needed was to hit him again with the dark vortex spell, to let the anger and the hurt out of her system. Tom was surprised to discover, that after all that had happened between the two of them, he would gladly let her do that again. Except this time, he wouldn’t mess it up by expecting any kind of affection from her in return. Star didn’t love him, and she didn’t want him. But if she indeed did simply hate him, then by the deceiver, may that hate be put to a good a use!

“Evil is relative, Star, and I say so with some personal understanding of the concept. I also have been called evil, after all,” Tom said as he shrugged. “From what I heard, you were less than forthcoming with one of your magical mishaps, and then got some ambiguous seer mumbo jumbo thrown at you. Big deal!”

It was, actually, a bigger deal than he was making it out to be, but Star didn’t need to hear that now. Prophecies were one time a blessing and ten times a curse, and it was always near impossible to untangle them until they came to happen. The girl had called Star “the dark queen ascending” and “the force of evil incarnate”, but Tom had a hard time seeing either of those come to pass, knowing Star like he did.

Not that he would care if Star ever did go dark, not really. Good or evil, she would still be herself, and that was all that mattered in his book. He was far more concerned about the fact that the prophecy also said that “death shall be the one to claim her”. That he could visualize, all to clearly. Tom Lucitor, prince of the underworld, was determined not to let that come to pass.

“Tom, you are evil,” Star said, giving him a look of disgust. “And... well, I didn’t think so back when we first met, or when we were together. I only realized it way too late. So, I think is very possible, well, that my moral compass is so very twisted that I can’t even realize that I am evil too, or turning evil. That, maybe, I have done something truly beyond the pale. Jackie seems to think so. And another reason I might be evil, is that I actually know for a fact that, right now, I am not nearly as concerned about the fact that I may become a dark queen when I grow-up-than-I-am-concerned-about-Marco-hating-me!”
Her words became quicker and quicker as she got to the last part, until there was a torrent of them stumbling one atop the other out of her mouth. She only paused because, near the end, it seemed, she had no choice but to take a breath of air. Tom sighed. There was only one way to get to her then, one way only. It was not what he would have preferred.

“Star, how do you think I know all of this? What happened back at Saint O’s, and the prophecy?” the demon prince asked her calmly.

“That’s obvious,” Star countered. “It is because you have been spying on me, again. Like evil people do! Like I did to Marco and Jackie...”

“Actually, Star, it’s because Marco called me, and asked me to find you,” he admitted.

For the first time, Star looked up and met his gaze, eyes filled with surprise and just the slightest dash of hope.

---

Princess White felt like she was going to puke listening to the two of them. So, the girl had managed to annoy her friends and now felt bad about it? And now the demon was, for some unfathomable reason, trying to reassure her it didn’t mean she was a bad person? Since when did a demon cared if someone was a bad person? If anything, he should be welcoming the fact that the girl thought herself evil. That self-perception made it so much more likely that she would fall into the fiend’s clever snare. White was sure, she could sense it in his body language, that the purple fiend lusted after the princess. It defied all she knew about the nature of the underworld denizens that he didn’t take her by force. Demons were, after all, creatures often slave to their own base emotions: lust, wrath, envy, and so forth.

It took her only an instant, after she let her bored mind tune out their conversation, to notice the rustling of the leaves a hundred or so paces away from where she was perched. The movement was almost in a perfect line with the angle from which the demon had come into the clearing.

Curious, the vampire slid unseen through branch and root, a quarter way around the clearing, and a short walk away from it. There she found a girl with hair almost as black as hers, with eyes dark green, and a black cloak around her. Her body seemed to rest against the tree, giving her back to the children in the clearing, just far away enough not to overhear even through the quietness of the night. She deliberately pretended that she was ignoring the other two teens, but her face was one of apprehension. In front of the girl, uncomfortably nested between scorched trees, was a skeletal horse, chained to a black unearthly carriage.

White gave herself a few minutes to examine the situation. She could kill the girl, of course, but to what end? To steal the black hearse? That she might do. If the vehicle belonged to the demon, then it was a way for her out of this forsaken place. And, she reminded herself, into an even more forsaken one. No, that would not do, not unless she was sure she could direct the carriage somewhere other than the underworld. She was bound to end there eventually anyways, and was in no hurry to make that trip.

Then, perhaps, it was better to learn more of the situation first. She drew her fangs back. Her face human again. Not just human, but alluringly beautiful. Snow White had once been called the fairest in all the land. Now, in what was left of her rebel princess attire, she figured she would look like a pretty rad punk girl. No way to tell for sure, of course, not without a reflection. She hadn’t had one of those for a pretty long while.

“Oh, sweet ride!” spoke White excitedly as she made her way out of the trees in front of Janna. Her
voice was carefully measured to be just below the nearby demon’s threshold of awareness, even if the mewman child shouts were to suddenly stop.

“Ah, it’s alright, I suppose,” the human girl shrugged. She seemed to inconspicuously move an arm to the inside of her cloak. Looking for a weapon? White thought it unimportant. “And who are you supposed to be?”

“Princess Lumi,” she responded without hesitation. It was a name she had used before. “I guess you have heard of St. O’s, right? Used to be super lame, now is a total party school. Which, I guess is a different kind of lame...”

“Right,” Janna agreed. “Tell me about it. So you are like, a troublemaker princess?”

“Eh,” White gave a noncommittal shrug. “I guess. I mean, clearly you get into some trouble yourself,” she observed, pointing at the carriage. “Not that you seem to mind. Are you the demon’s... servant?”

White’s mask was intended to look like a far more naive girl than she herself, trying to appear to be shrewd and conspiratorial. The dark haired human smiled in return, taking the role of the more experienced one, exactly as White had hoped. No better way to make someone vulnerable, than to trick them into feeling strong.

“What makes you think it is not the other way around?” Janna asked.

“Well, for one, kid, that is clearly a demon prince. For another, I can see the chain marks on your wrists,” thought White. But Lumi’s face reflected only surprise and what was intended to read as badly concealed admiration.

“Oh, are you a powerful witch, then? You must be! Wow, that’s actually pretty cool,” she spoke. The girl seemed like the type to be amenable to flattery. “If you are the one in control, then perhaps I could... no, I mean, we just met, it is too much to ask. But could I maybe see the inside of, of that...?” White pointed towards the infernal carriage.

“Sure,” the foolish human conceded with a smile. That’s when White noticed the flickering purple light emanating from inside the velvet cloak. “And, after that, why don’t I give you a ride to Earth myself so that you can feast on the blood of all my classmates? I mean, I’d consider it if it was only Brittney, maybe Sabrina...”

“Yeah...? What?” Lumi reacted with confusion and surprise to the human’s words. She paused as if to try and comprehend what the other girl was saying. Inwardly, White used that requisite pause, that pretended hesitation, to attempt to figure out how it was she had been found out. The game was clearly up, even if it didn’t hurt her to keep the charade a few more seconds. Was there anything she had forgotten in her disguise? “You are joking, right? I mean, jeez, I know I don’t dress like a goody-two-shoes, but you seriously have been spending too much time with demons if you think...”

“Oh, come on, that’s just sad. Just drop the damn act,” Janna interrupted her. “Seriously, how naive do you think I am?! You are obviously that vampire bitch Marco was talking about!”

Ah, it seemed White’s reputation had preceded her for once. She supposed that would explain her failed bluff. When Janna took her left hand out the cloak, a small sphere of burning purple flames danced in her palm. She raised her right hand as well, and half of the flames jumped there. In an instant, both spheres had grown again to the size of a large man’s fist.
Princess Lumi’s mask fell in an instant at that point, and White’s features, still human, turned sharp and cruel. She smirked. “Naive enough to oppose me openly. Which makes you at best a clever fool!”

“Marco called you?” Star asked, looking at Tom. That didn’t sound right. Why would Marco send Tom to her, of all people? Specially after what he knew from her Princess Song. But, but, it meant that Marco cared, didn’t it? That he wanted to have someone look after her, even if he himself didn’t want to see her. Oh, well, he had always been a sweetheart, taking pity on the evil wretch that was the wicked princess of Mewni...

“Star, he, and Jackie too, searched for you the entire afternoon, until it went dark. Then they started to get truly worried, so they went back to Heinous’ room, and they called me on the mirror,” Tom said. “I am sorry, I would have been here sooner, but I insisted on knowing the whole story before I set out to find you. Then, when I heard how she had spoken to you, I wasted even more time in saying things to that Jackie girl that I don’t really believe, but which made me feel much better. I recall a particularly good one about her having sexual congress with a dolphin...”

The mewman chuckled. She felt almost surprised that she could still chuckle. But the knowledge that her friends still cared about her was enough to lift her spirits considerably. Wait, was laughing about something like that something an evil princess would do?

“So, basically, they are angry, Star,” Tom admitted. The princess felt her heart sink back into despair for a moment. “But they don’t hate you, and they certainly don’t think you are evil. Ask Marco if you can’t take my word for it. Just like this: ‘Hey, Marco, do you think I am evil, or did I just fuck up?’”

Star thought about it for a moment. Yeah, she had fucked up, and she had doubled down on her fuck ups by not telling either of them sooner. She put herself in Jackie’s shoes, and she knew she would have been hurt, and Jackie was more sensitive about her privacy than Star was. But feeling hurt, and feeling angry, and yelling at someone, didn’t mean you considered them irredeemably evil, or even that they were no longer your friends.

She thought about Marco. He had clearly been put on the spot there, between both of his girlfriends. He had just lost his most prized possession, and had just wanted to figure out a way home. He didn’t hate her, not really. Star could almost see him, calling out after her, just a moment too late for her to hear, then spending the entire day searching for her.

Both of them would be worried, maybe even feel guilty, and here she was wallowing in self-pity rather than owning up to what she had done to hurt them. Well, fuck up number three.

“I, I think I know the answer,” Star dried her tears with one arm. “But I am going to ask, just in case.”

“Good,” Tom remarked. “Now, Star, not asking for anything between us anymore, not even forgiveness, but... do you truly think I am evil, or did I just fuck up?”

“You fucked up, Tom,” Star said after taking a moment to think it through. “But I also fucked up that night. Tom, I don’t want you to think there is any chance of us getting back together, because, I am sorry, there isn’t. But I do forgive you, and I hope you forgive me, and if all that works for you, I would want us to be friends.”

“Can’t imagine anything better,” said the demon boy, with a broad smile.
“Friends?” asked Star, nervously, lifting a fist.

“Friends!” Tom fist-bumped her.

Wait, was she the last person in all dimensions to learn that gesture? Guess that’s one downside of growing up with a bestie with no fists to bump. Speaking of which, “Oh, Tom, what about Pony Head?”

“She was with them too,” noted Tom. “And angrier at Jackie than even I was. Say what you want about that pain in the butt, but she is fiercely loyal.”

“Yeah, she is,” Star admitted, feeling a lot better now that she knew she had not lost all her friends. If anything, she had perhaps regained one. There were plenty of amends to make, but well, she could always bake the two humans cookies when they all got back to Earth! Ok, maybe not cookies. Based on previous experiences, that was not a good way for her to say sorry.

Wait! How were they going to get back to Earth? The scissors still didn’t work, the mirror didn’t work… except…

“Tom, you said they called you from the mirror?! I thought it was broken.”

“No, it reached me just fine,” said Tom with a quick shrug. “Maybe it is not reaching Mewni for some reason? Either way, we can check, right now. My carriage is just that way, and it got me here. It will probably take us to Mewni too unless there is something else wrong, no scissors required.”

----

“Those magics did not impress me eight hundred years ago, when I was young and foolish. They certainly do not impress me now.” the vampire princess scoffed at Janna’s purple blazes. “If you truly know who I am, you know you cannot hope to defeat me.”

The troublemaker felt her head burn in pain with the concentration required to keep the magical fireballs under control, to guide the forces she had stolen from her undead enemy, from her magical friend, and from her demonic lover. She knew it was just a whiff from their power, in each case, so little that they had not noticed her reaching for it. It was, Janna thought, amused, a bit like taking five dollars out of Marco’s wallet for lunch. As long as she did it only occasionally, neither would realize anything was missing.

She had considered playing along a bit longer. Let the vampire princess believe she had bought her pretense, maybe try to get some information out of her. But there was little she could ask ‘Lumi’ where the response wouldn’t be predictably useless. She could have just made excuses not to show her the inside of the carriage, to stall until Tom came back, but then she wouldn’t have a chance to ask the real White any questions. As soon as Star and Tom got involved, the evil princess would almost certainly flee, otherwise she would have gone to the clearing in the first place.

“But I don’t have to beat you,” Janna observed, trying to match Snow White’s smirk with an evil grin of her own. “I only need something to hold you at bay for long enough for me to cry out for help. Then Tom and Star will come, and kick your undead ass, Vladislava.”

Even that was not a given, that she could hold her off long enough to cry for help. She had heard, from Jackie, that the evil princess was fast, impossibly fast. She also knew she had gone toe to toe with Star’s magic, or at least with some of her spells cast in advance. Janna knew her own magic wasn’t even in the same ballpark. Maybe her spells would cause the creature no harm and her
throat would be pierced by sharp white fangs before she could even yell for help. There was a pretty big chance forcing White’s hand had been a bad idea after all, that she should shout now if she was ever going to. But, there was also the issue that, well, she didn’t want to cry out. Not if there was any other option.

“Ah, but the question is, then: why haven’t you cried out already?” White observed, more amused than concerned. “I see. You don’t dare interrupt him, not while he is talking to her, not unless you absolutely must. So you are looking for an alternative, a way to beat me that does not involve them, or a way to bluff me into withdrawing. Am I right?”

Janna tried to keep her face straight. To not betray even a hint of how much White’s cold read had shaken her. But the dark princess was right. Janna definitely didn’t want to yell for Tom when he was with Star. Partly because she cared about her friend, and they had agreed, earlier, that it was better if Tom went to her to talk some sense into her without bringing up the fact that Janna had spent a weekend in hell. There would always be time to tell her that after she had calmed down. But there were other reasons, darker reasons.

First, Janna didn’t want to seem needy, or like she cared if Tom was talking to Star. Second, she thought of the possibility of Tom coming to help her, and, in her grief and confusion, Star fleeing away. It had taken them long enough to find her as it was. Not only would that be bad for Star, it would also make Tom angry at her. The worst part was, Janna knew those weren’t good enough reasons to risk her life over them, but still, she found that she could not just yell for help, not unless Snow White moved to attack. She didn’t. Not with fangs, at least.

“Pfft, I just don’t want you to go running away like a coward when they come here!” pointed out Janna. It was no longer really true. In any case, it was not wise to say it, it put White on guard about Janna’s intentions at best, and might make her angry at worst.

There was something making it hard for Janna to think, to strategize; the strain of maintaining her spell, perhaps? or something else? No matter, keep talking, keep her distracted, that was the only thing that mattered now. “How come you are a vampire? Do you automatically turn evil when you become a vampire? What the hell is the deal with your green eyed freak of a friend?”

Instead of seeming mad, the dark princess shrugged and grinned back at Janna. She seemed to regard her very intently. Undead eyes gazing deeply into human ones as she sized her up. The troublemaker girl felt her body shiver with the effort of keeping the purple flames alive. White moved neither closer nor further away from her, seemingly unconcerned by the magical fireballs.

“I was born dark, a myth among the myths, but most of my kind are turned. Those who are turned are still themselves, until hunger and age strip them of their delusions of morality,” she had counted to two with her fingers, as she answered the first two questions. “And there are many tales told of me, all true in part and false in part.”

Three fingers up. A mocking smile.

“What about your friend?!!”

“What about her?”

“Her riddles, how do you know what they mean?” risked Janna. It was too important to be left unasked.

“No one does. She has the gift of prophecy. What she says will come to pass, one way or another,
and you can spend years pouring over every word for a way to avoid it and still be caught in the net in the end.” The vampire’s smirk told the human girl that White had spotted her own shock. The vampire was smart, smart enough to know that Janna wouldn’t have asked if there hadn’t been a prophecy and that she would not have reacted this way unless the prophecy was bad. A pale hand raised a fourth and final finger. “So, I have answered four of your questions, and I shall ask four of mine: this prophecy, the one that made you ask, does it involve your demon master? Does it involve you? How about the Mewman princess?”

“Yes, yes, and no” Janna lied.

She had never been one for playing fair. She estimated a higher than even chance that her counterpart had been honest in all her answers, but that did not mean she had to be. White seemed to buy her answer. But then again, she was known to be a good actress.

“You care for him, don’t you?” the princess smiled and glanced at a place behind Janna’s back. Not being an utter fool, the troublemaker girl did not turn around to follow that gaze. “The demon. Alright, my fourth question: Do you love him?”

“That, would be saying too much,” Janna attempted to brush off the question.

“No,” White’s face was clearly mocking her now. “I think that would be saying just enough. Also, I believe you lied about at least one other answer. You love him. He loves her. It is a story as old as tale, and it has quite a sad ending. Am I right?”

Well, Janna thought, at least she had managed to fool the monster, throw her off the scent. Cass prophecy had nothing to do with any of that. And yet, a voice in her head whispered that it was indeed probable that White’s own words would also turn prophetic nonetheless. It was certainly not a new fear for the troublemaker girl.

“She doesn’t love him, though,” the human girl replied, unsure of what compelled her to argue against the vampire, specially about something like this. She should be throwing her fireballs at her, or crying for help, now that she had gotten her answers. But she felt like she could not move a muscle. Her mind was racing with thoughts of Tom, and what he felt for Star, and not for her, never for her.

“Oh,” White spoke, “but she is pretty, and you are not. She is royalty and you are not. She is powerful and you are not. And so, even if he stays with you, his heart will always be hers, whether she ever choses to claim it or not. The instant she wishes, what you imagine to be yours, she can take to be hers…”

“I can take something of hers too!” shouted Janna back, feeling suddenly irritated. Angry at White, angry at Star, angry at reality. She wasn’t sure why she had even said that, but she could… she could… well, pickpocket Star’s magic, if you could call it that. And Star would never know! Maybe that made up for the fact that Tom was still obsessed with Star. Maybe that made them even.

“No, foolish child,” White shook her head sadly. “You can’t. At best…”

In an instant she was in front of her, having moved too fast to be seen. Her hand choked Janna’s windpipe, making it impossible for her to cry out. White lowered her own face, her blood red lips, towards Janna’s outreached hands, and blew out her magic flames like birthday candles.

“... at best you can beg for crumbs,” the vampire lifted her face and grinned victoriously. Then, she drew a finger to her face. “Now, shush, you wouldn’t want to distract your love when he is with
someone he cares about. Not over something as unimportant as your life. Would you?”

Fangs sprouted out from inside Snow White’s pretty lips, her eyes turning bloodshot as well. She leaned downwards again, towards her neck. Janna tried to cry out, to yell, but she couldn’t even breathe. She felt the vampire’s lips against her flesh, and then...

White licked her neck and drew away again, chuckling softly. The creature of the night shrugged, as if implying she wasn’t worth drinking her blood, only barely worth toying with. Well, Janna thought, that’s something White and Tom had in common.

Faster than shadow, and faster than wind, White let go of her neck and jumped up, disappearing almost into thin air. Janna did not see where she went, and she did not cry out either. She just collapsed against the tree, pale with fright and feeling terrible about her lot in the world, for quite unrelated reasons. In her heart of hearts, something dark began to fester.

----

It was only a few minutes later when the other two teens finally left the clearing. Star looked slightly less disconsolate than before, Tom walked besides her, looking around nervously for, for...

“Hey, Star,” spoke a seemingly bored girl, leaning against a tree.

“Whoa, Janna Banana,” spoke Star, clearing her face once more with the back of her own dirty right arm. “What are you doing here?”

“I wonder that myself,” Janna scoffed.

“Eh, sorry Star,” Tom scratched the back of his head. “She was, ahem, at my place, you know, when Marco called.”

“Oh,” mouthed Star. “Sorry about what? Anyways, cool to see you. I am sorry I am such a mess right now, I... let’s go find Marco, and... and Pony Head, and Jackie.”

Janna seemed about to say something, but held back in the last minute. The other children didn’t notice.

From her hiding spot, already inside the demon prince’s hearse-like coach, White felt her unbeating heart sing a song of joyous malice.

All was going according to plan. The longer she waited, the less the human would be able to say anything about her encounter with her. It was all part of the suggestion, and it would take hold slowly but surely in her mind. Snow White had always had a way with words, and the mesmerizing gaze of a strong vampire, and those were often more wicked weapons than blades or fangs.

It would fulfill the wording of her deal with Prince Jack: to leave Star alone. The mewman would never see Princess White again, nor would the vampire actually be the one to hurt her. Yet, this night, the seeds of her revenge were already planted, and now all she had to do was wait. Perhaps, in time, she would find similar ways to get to the other two. If not, she just had to hope that this would be grievous enough retribution unto all of them.

As a bonus, she could now hitch a ride, making her own escape by secretly following her enemies. A shadow of victory, within the mid-day of her temporary defeat.

----
“Star!” Marco cried out as soon as he saw her emerge from the blood-red doors of the hearse. He ran to hug her, but someone cut in before him, tackling him out of the way.

“B-fly!” shouted Pony Head. “Sooo good to see you are alright! Don’t ever ever scare me like that again, gurrl!”

“Awwww, Pony Head! Nothing to worry about,” Star said hugging her older bestie, then made a gesture to punch the air. “I can handle myself, remember?”

“Right,” scoffed Tom, emerging right behind her. Star stuck her tongue at him.

“Hey, glad you found her, man,” Marco nodded towards Tom. Then, turning towards Star, “He didn’t do anything stupid, right? We couldn’t think of anyone else to call, so...”

“Yeah, no, Marco, it was alright,” Star replied. It still felt a bit awkward, she had to admit. There was so much to say, so much to apologize for. But for now she was just happy the boy was looking at her and talking to her. “Tom and I, well, were are cool now. We are friends. I mean, we fisted each other and all!”

Everyone’s eyes went huge at that. Tom gulped. Pony Head’s mouth went slack. Jackie, who had not yet said anything and stood a few steps back from the group, with her hands behind her back, suddenly seemed to cough in surprise.

“Wait, I think she means they fist-bumped,” Marco reasoned. “Please tell me you mean you two fist-bumped, Star!”

“Yeah, yeah, that...” Star shrugged.

It begun with Marco, nervously. Then Tom, who rolled his eyes. Then Pony Head, raucously. Then Jackie, who tried to conceal it, and Janna, bitterly. They all, one by one began to chuckle. Star didn’t yet get the joke, and she intuited it was at her expense, but she felt relieved as everyone seemed to relax, even just a little bit. Soon she had joined them in laughing too, even if she didn’t know why.

“I... Star, I am sorry, I shouldn’t have said what I did...” Marco begun. Star cut him off.

“Not now, Marco. You were right, we need to get home first, then we can talk this all calmly,” the mewman said, holding her hand up. “But, for the record, I know I fucked up, and I know what I did was terrible and keeping it a secret was also terrible. I know it will take more than one apology, but for what is worth, I am sorry... I... You don’t think I am evil because of it, right?”

“Of course not, Star!” Marco shook his head in disbelief, and Star smiled in return.

It was then that Jackie walked up to her, and extended both arms towards the princess. In her palms laid the Kingdom of Mewni’s most sacred heirloom: Star’s royal magic wand. The human girl offered it to her without hesitation. Not exactly the wise thing to do when you heard someone was well in her path to become a dark queen, not unless you believed that was absolute hogwash.

“Star, what you did wasn’t cool,” She said simply. “But you are still cool, alright?”

Star took back the wand from the other girl, carefully. Then, trying to remember the right Earth custom, or at least the right Jackie custom, she asked, “So, are we cool?”

Jackie seemed to hesitate for a bit. “... I think we are going to be, Star. Just, maybe give me more than a day to process all of this? I mean, this weekend was pretty crazy, you know? But, well, most
of it wasn’t bad at all... so thanks for that?”

Star smiled and Jackie smiled back.

“Ok, what are we waiting for?!” Star shouted. “Tom, if you’d be so kind, could we go to Mewni first? If the scissors are not working there either, then we might also need you to take some of us to Earth...”

“Sure, Star,” Tom shrugged. “Will wait for you all there for a bit. No biggie.”

----

Tom’s hearse was surprisingly spacious on the inside; quite able to accommodate the five teens for the brief inter-dimensional road trip. It wasn’t nearly as instantaneous a method of travel as dimensional scissors were, but it was still impressively fast given the vast gulf between worlds. It was barely a half-hour trip between St O’s and Mewni, it would perhaps be twice as long to Earth.

Strangely enough, Marco and Tom passed the time together, playing video games. Meanwhile, Janna, who had remained inside before, was keeping Jackie busy by asking her, in through detail, about her fight with princess White, seemingly both curious and impressed. Since Pony Head had once again stayed behind in St. O’s, this left out Star once more. She could not join either group right now, not without feeling at least a bit awkward.

That said, it wasn’t so bad this time, not like in the forest. Sure, she was left alone to think, but this time her thoughts were calmer. She thought back to Cass and her prophecy: “Only surrender may undo the shadow, but the price shall be too high to pay”. That meant there was a price, though, right? Something she could do or sacrifice to avoid the fate that the brunette girl had predicted for her. To avoid going dark.

It was not something Star wanted to think about. Normally, the mewman avoided thinking about all the things she didn’t want to think about. Hell, right now she was avoiding thinking about the conversation she still had to have, with Jackie and Marco, when they got back to Earth. But, even then, it didn’t feel right to ignore Cass’ words in that same way, no matter what Tom had said. If her fate was to become evil, and there was a price, any price, that she could pay to avoid it, then she needed to be ready to pay that price. Right? Whatever it was, it couldn’t be worth it, not if the alternative was Star becoming... what? Eclipsa? Princess White? Someone Marco and Jackie could truly hate rather than just excuse as a mess up of a princess? Star didn’t know.

“Hey, Star,” Marco’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Are you ok?”

Star saw then that Tom and the human boy had finished her game. ‘Tom: 58, Marco: 0’ read the screen. The demon prince had then made his way to where Janna and Jackie were talking, and was now laughing with them, with an arm draped around the troublemaker’s shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah, Marco,” Star forced a smile. “I am fine, go have fun.”

“Fun? Playing any game with Tom is only fun for one of us, Star,” Marco shrugged. “But, seriously, are you sure you are fine? If this is about the spell backfiring, I... Star, it doesn’t matter to me, not as much as seeing you hurt over it. Just, maybe, can you not do that again, Star, please?”

“It is not just about that, Marco. It is about, you know, the ‘evil incarnate’ bit,” Star admitted. “And, well, I am not sure I can avoid doing it again, either. I get the visions now, whether I want them or not... I’ll try, you know? Make an effort not to watch, but...”

“An effort is enough for me, Star. Although not so sure about Jackie,” Marco hesitated. “But, Star,
no matter what it is: Ludo, Toffee, gift card monsters, vampire princesses, weird sex telepathy, or even destiny itself! I’ll be there, alright? We will face it together, whatever it is. Because I love you. Because you are my best friend. But most of all, because I know you Star, and I know no matter what it is, you can do it. Screw prophecy. Prophecy never has had to contend with Star Butterfly and Marco Diaz!"

“Awwwww, Marco!” Star smiled, and cried. They were tears of joy. She turned back to hug the best bestie a bestie could have, and the best boyfriend a girl could wish for. They stayed like that, hugging in silence, for what felt like an eternity. Only stopping when Tom announced they had reached Mewni and the Butterfly Castle.

----

The demonic carriage appeared right in front of the castle bridge. A few townsfolk ran away in fright, spooked by the sudden burst of flames and the skeletal horse. The royal guards remained at their posts, however. They were all disciplined enough, or accustomed enough to the weirdness of Mewni nobility and their allies, not to be surprised when the demon prince carriage emerged from the flames. Nor did they seem particularly confused when their princess, Star Butterfly, emerged from the hearse herself, her friends following behind her.

The first thing Star noticed, was the somber expression in those same guards’ faces. They nodded gravely at her as she emerged from the carriage. They clicked their heels a bit more stiffly, a bit more formally, than they would usually do in the presence of the princess. Then she saw the banners; all black. Then she spotted the flag of House Butterfly, flying at half-mast over the castle towers. Finally, she saw her father.

King River Butterfly of Mewni, born River Johansen, seemed to have aged ten years in the two days his daughter had been gone. Some measure of happiness and a huge wave of relief washed over his face the moment he laid eyes on Star. Even then, that did not hide the immense sorrow underneath. He came running through the bridge as fast as she had ever seen him run, even when he was much younger. His eyes were still bloodshot red, worse than her own had been earlier that night. He looked pale, sick.

He hugged his daughter tightly, and Star let herself be hugged, limply. Normally, she would have been so happy to see her dad, and so eager to hug him in return. But her mind had taken in all the signs, even as she refused to process them. She had read it all in his expression, even as she wished she was wrong, as she told herself she had to be wrong. That there was no way, no way at all.

It occurred then to Star that there was indeed a price that would have been too high to pay for the goodness of her heart, or for her own life. It occurred to her that such price might have already been paid, and that nothing that had been gained, nothing that could be gained, in exchange, would ever come close to being worth such a price.

River Butterfly let go of her daughter, and looked her in the eyes, as the horror Star felt seemed to reflect into the usually carefree blue orbs of her father.

“Dad, where is mommy?”

----

END of Part II
Coming up next:

Part III: Going Through Hell

Chapter 19: Long Live the Queen.
Part III: Going Through Hell

Chapter 19: Long Live the Queen

Jackie traced her fingers softly along the contours of the boy's chest. It had been over a week now since they last had been alone like this. Her heart thumped with excitement, as much the fiftieth time as it had the first. For someone who could pull a pink dress better than her, Marco was downright manly. Lean, sure, but also well toned, muscles trained over years of karate practice and months of monster fighting. She whistled appreciatively and leaned in to kiss the boy's soft lips.

Their tongues sought each other hungrily, as Jackie felt herself melt out of reality for a second. His hands reached behind and down to cup her ass. The room around them, Marco’s room, seemed to vanish, and soon it was only the two of them, floating in empty space. It was not unlike that one time in between the aerial silk ribbons.

She broke the kiss, then began tracing a trail of smaller kisses, tiny pecks on the skin as she moved down his neck, his chest, his abs. When she got down to the waist she looked up towards him, and gave Marco her most mischievous smile, as her hands began to undo the buttons of his jeans.

“Wait, Jackie, I can’t do this,” Marco stopped her. His tone was regretful, but his gaze firm. “Not today.”

“Awww, Marco, having performance anxiety?” she joked. Jackie knew full well that wasn’t the issue, and Marco knew she knew. Still it didn’t prevent her from turning her frustration into a friendly jib at her boyfriend. “It happens to a lot of guys, you know? Maybe you should just relax and wait a little bit?”

Marco groaned, “It’s not that, Jackie, it’s...”

“... Star,” Jackie finished the sentence before he could. “Yeah, dude, I know.”

It wasn’t only that Star could be, would be, seeing them if they went any further than that. Hell, for all they knew of that stupid spell, she had seen what they had done just now too. Jackie herself had been hesitant to be alone with her boyfriend for the last few days, precisely because she didn’t know how she felt about the fact that, well, that any time they got busy, Star would be there, watching, whether she did that on purpose or not. But she knew that wasn’t what Marco meant. It was not that it didn’t bother him too, but still, he was even more worried about how the princess
herself would feel.

“Tomorrow is the wake, Jackie,” Marco reminded her, as if she needed to be reminded. “It just doesn’t seem right, for Star to see us, you know... not when she is grieving.”

“I don’t see how that one is our fault, though, Marco,” she scoffed bitterly. It was petty of her to say it, but damn if it wasn’t true.

“No, it isn’t,” agreed the boy. “But it is not about who is at fault. She told me she literally can’t prevent herself from watching at this point. I don’t want to put any more on her plate, not now.”

Jackie nodded. Marco was a sweetheart, and he was right. The skateboarder girl was still angry at Star, angry that she had been spying on them, angry that she hadn’t told them, angry that she had made things between her and Marco so incredibly awkward. But in the end, that didn’t matter compared to what their mewman friend was going through right now.

“Right,” Jackie mused, as she began rearranging her hair. She really should have thought about Star, should have stopped being angry at her. Her mom had died, and instead of having the time to grieve and shout and be angry like a normal teenager under those circumstances, Star Butterfly had to stay on Mewni and organize her own mother’s funeral. Not to mention the coronation. The human girl remembered the Song Day celebration, what it meant for Star to become queen. How much the other girl had wished that day never came... and now that day was right around the corner, whether she wanted or not. “Guess I am just awful.”

“Oh, come on,” lamented Marco. “Not you too. We are all under a lot of stress, alright? It is messing all of us up.”

“All of us?” quipped Jackie. “You seem to be dealing with it pretty well, dude.”

“I am not, Jackie,” he replied. “I am finding it harder and harder to talk to Star these days, even on the mirror. I miss having my best friend around and it has only been a week. I feel guilty I didn’t stay in Mewni with her, no matter what she says. And, oh, yeah, I can’t help but feel it is my fault that Queen Moon died...”

“What?! Whoa, Diaz! How on Earth or Mewni is that last one your fault?” Jackie stopped him and put a hand on his shoulder.

He paused for a moment before answering, “Well, if not for Princess Marco, there wouldn’t have been a princess revolution. Without that, no Princess White. Without that, no Pony Head dragging us to St. O’s that night. Which means we would have been in Mewni at the time, and Star would have been there when her mom was attacked and she would have the wand...”

“Dude,” Jackie interrupted him again. “First of all, that is a remarkably long chain of events in which many more people other than you had a hand in. Second, if we had been there, maybe Star herself would have been... Look, for all you know, not being there saved us, saved Star. Third, there is absolutely no chance you could have predicted all that in advance! You can’t blame yourself for not anticipating something no one ever could.”

“Yeah, Jackie, I know. But, like I said, it is messing all of us up. Still, thanks for saying it aloud, it helps to hear it from someone else,” Marco smiled. It soon turned into a frown. “But it is messing Star up the most, though. I just wish I knew she was alright.”

“Yeah, dude, me too.”

----
“Moon Butterfly, Queen of Mewni, Honoris High-commissioner of Magic, Protector of the Lands, Preserver of the Peace, Wielder of the Royal Magic Wand, Moon the Undaunted, the Lizard Vanquisher, my mother. A week ago she left us, and in her place there is a hole in the firmament, and in the heart of every citizen of Mewni, including my own. She was just, and wise, and kind, and fierce. She put the kingdom’s needs before her own, in times of plenty and in times of need. She was our light in every cloudy day, and she would not sleep until the least of her subjects was safe from harm,” Star read to the empty cemetery, at night. The statues of former queens of Mewni, as well as their kings and consorts, were her only audience for this final rehearsal.

She paused to take a breath, and then continued, “She has left us, and none of us can ever hope to fill her shoes. Least of all me. Nonetheless, I shall try to be the best queen I can be in my mother stead. I am Star Butterfly, Princess of Mewni, Wielder of the Royal Magic Wand. I have spent the last year on Earth, and many of you don’t know me, and those who do might not have good reason to trust my words. But I promise, with Solena, and Skywynne, and Celena, and Solaria, and all former Queens of Mewni as my witnesses, that I will try to be just and kind and wise as a ruler, and to... sniff... be half the queen my... sniff... mother was.”

She had written the words over days, and practiced them until she knew them by heart, and yet every time she read them, she broke down crying. It was not her usual infantile bawling, but a slow trickling of tears, accompanied by a sharp pain in her heart like she had never experienced before; not when she lost her wand, or when she lost Glossaryck, or when she lost her book of spells, not even close.

Star was about to collapse on the ground to cry, amidst the marble tombs and sculptures, atop the soft graveyard grass, when she heard a soft slow clapping to her right. She turned around, to see Tom, in a somber black suit, walking towards her.

“For what it’s worth, Star, I think you’ll do a much better job as queen than I’ll ever do as king,” he remarked.

“Tom? What are you doing here?” the princess answered, surprised.

“Creeping, I guess, old habits...” he joked apologetically, and Star chuckled despite herself. “But really, Star, I wanted to talk to you, to see how you were doing and to, well, to offer my condolences. I don’t think I can, or should, be at the wake tomorrow, but I felt I had to say something. Only, now, I have no idea what to say.”

“Tell me about it,” replied Star.

She honestly wouldn’t have minded Tom and his family attending her mom’s funeral tomorrow. They were, after all, friends of the family. But royal wakes were open events in Mewni, which meant a large portion of the kingdom’s subjects would be in attendance. The fact that some monsters would be welcomed, by special permission of Star, was already somewhat controversial. Inviting the Lucitors too would be, how did her mom put it: bad optics. Her princess song didn’t help that, either. Star grimaced, not even a queen yet and she already had to start thinking like one, speaking like one. It was suffocating.

“Tom,” she spoke quietly, barely a whisper. “I have to ask: do you think you could help me see my mom again, even for a moment? Is there any way? I already tried on my own, everything but the Seeing Eye spell... I don’t trust that one now. Nothing I can do seems to work... I know you can bring the dead back, at least partially, could you...?”

“Star...” Tom sounded uncomfortable, and sad beyond measure. He walked towards her and shook his head, not quite regretfully. “Your mom is never going to be down there, and I can’t take you to
the other place. For what it’s worth, I am sure you’ll see her again, though, when it is time.”

“Unless I do end down there,” Star mused. She began walking towards the altar. In a table, in front of the sacred symbols, was a crystal casket, built by Rhombulus himself. Inside the casket was Moon, immobile, peaceful, as if sleeping. Not for the first time, Star wished she had at least had the chance to say sorry. For everything.

“You won’t,” Tom assured her.

“How can you be sure?” the mewman countered. “I have done some pretty bad things already, to my friends. I was never a very good daughter, either. And well, I have cast dark magic...”

“Star, your mom cast dark magic too, at least once,” the demon prince reasoned. “That doesn’t make her a bad person. It is about intent, and the lines you intentionally do or do not cross.”

But Star was no longer listening, she had stopped listening the moment Tom spoke about her mom, as if he knew her better than Star herself did. “My mom cast dark magic?”

“Ah, well, I only heard about it back then from rumors, you know? I wasn’t in Mewni at the time or anything,” he clarified. “But, well, how much do you know about how your mom got that Lizard Vanquisher title?”

Right, Tom had been around back then. It was hard to imagine. The boy looked her age, acted her age, and for all she knew might be the equivalent to her age in demon years. But demons lived far longer than Mewmans, millennia instead of decades. She wondered if that made her former relationship with the fiend like, super icky. But, right now, she couldn’t summon enough energy to care about something like that.

“Not much,” Star admitted. “I know she fought Toffee when she was young, and maybe a whole monster army, but not much more than that.”

Why had she never asked her mom about that? Why had Moon never told her? It was silly to ask. Moon never talked about the days when she first became queen, and Star never asked, because the topic was painful for both of them. It was then that Star realized that her mom had lost grandma when she was not much older than herself. She alone would have understood what Star was going through now, and now Star would never be able to ask her, because she was gone.

“She defeated Toffee with a dark spell,” Tom spoke.

“Yes, I guess I knew that: ‘The immortal monster will long be haunted by the darkest spell of Moon the Undaunted’, ” she quoted the tapestry’s words.

“Except it was also a dark spell of Eclipsa, Queen of Darkness,” Tom corrected her. Then, he added with a shrug, “Not really sure if it was her darkest spell too or not.”

Star’s mouth fell open with shock, and she couldn’t think of anything to say. Eclipsa’s spell? From the book? She had read Eclipsa’s chapter, and there wasn’t anything in there like that. But Tom proceeded to tell her the story, the best he knew. And what a story it was!

Eclipsa was alive! And Star’s mom had made a deal with her, a deal for a spell that could kill Toffee in exchange for the dark queen’s freedom. But the spell had misfired, or maybe Moon had realized her potential mistake and purposefully stayed her hand in the last moment. Either way, it had been sufficient to disperse Toffee’s army. And, not having killed him, the magical contract remained unfulfilled. Eclipsa remained crystallized.
“Wow, Tom, I never knew...” Star grasped for something to say. Then, with a smile, she settled on “...Thank you.”

“No problem. I can see why your mom didn’t like talking about it, but you would have learned this sooner or later, now that you are going to be... I mean, never mind, you would have known soon,” Tom corrected himself. “But my point is, using a dark spell didn’t make your mother dark, not when used for a good purpose.”

“I don’t think that’s exactly what I did, though,” reasoned Star, thinking back to the night she cast the All-Seeing Eye. It had definitely not been for a good purpose. Wasn’t lust a cardinal sin, both on Earth and on Mewni?

“Right, Star. Let’s just say that eternal damnation takes more than a prank that accidentally went over the line,” Tom shrugged. “Cold-blooded murder, hurting the innocent in an obsessive quest for revenge, wanton acts of tyranny, those are the kinds of things I see queens and kings go down there for. The last Butterfly queen we got was Eris the Silent, who covered and approved of the abuses of Mewni’s cruelest guild for decades, and presided unmoved over the most decadent and corrupt court your kingdom has ever seen. Even someone like that is a borderline case.”

“What about Eclipsa?” the princess asked.

“Star... Eclipsa is alive.”

“Oh, Right.”

----

Marco glided through the darkness, flying above the ocean of emerald flames. Below him, the smoke rose from the ashes of the Afflicted Forest. Nachos, his trusted dragon-cycle companion, was the only thing between him and a deadly fall into the green inferno below. The last time he had been here, the air itself had been infused with the deadliest of poisons. But the dark clouds around him were completely inert, as if the fire had sterilized even the arcane toxins of the place. The earth itself burned, as if made not of rock but dry grass, down to the very foundations of the world.

“Hekapoo!” he cried, desperately. The squawking cries of a murder of five-eyed crows was his only answer.

The last time he had come here, it had been in victory, his quest completed, his prize ready at hand. Now he felt just like the crows, struggling just to keep afloat over the hell which welcomed him.

Marco lifted his right hand, keeping the left one on Nachos’ horns, his powerful muscular legs pressing against the equally strong dragon body. Sixteen years older than even an hour ago, he was in the best shape of his entire life. Neither as guild-master, nor as warrior, had he been so powerful. And yet, compared to the devastation that surrounded him, he felt so very powerless.

Still, he was not without resources. He carefully intoned twelve words of power, brought his knuckles to his mouth, drew breath, and calmly exhaled into his clenched fist. It lit up with golden light. He extended up a single finger, and all the power of the ritual began flowing slowly towards its tip.

Magic always came from somewhere. It was a lesson that Marco had learned in those long sixteen years away from home, a fact he would never have realized while he only hung around Star, back on Earth or Mewni. People like Star, like Hekapoo, like Tom, had vast pools of magic to draw from, wherever they went. Most others drew power from those around them, or from the land
There was a third source of magic, however, one favored by sages and by madmen, and by the
gods, when even they required help. It was the magic of barter, of treaty, of compact. It was a
bargain with just but uncompromising masters. The ritual magics which Marco summoned now
were one such trade: a spell to find that which had gone missing. The cost was to lose what had
been found: to forget something one already knew, of equal value to that gained. The ancient
powers only rule was fairness, and their taste was one for irony.

Without knowing, or caring, which memory he might have given up in exchange, he began tracing
the word in the air with his finger. He began with the glyph for ‘fire’, one of the simplest and
oldest in the otherwise intricate script of Riradesh, almost reminiscent of the more primal symbols
of the Ancient Tongue. To the left, he continued the line to draw the blade, another simple stroke,
continued into the slightly more involved glyph for ‘construction’. Around the two he traced a
much more complicated pattern. It wasn’t exactly void, or universe; the literal translation would
have perhaps been ‘the empty place between the many places’. The final component meant
something akin to mastery, and something akin to ownership, and it implied the feminine: ‘she
who knows this thing so completely as to command it as its rightful mistress’.

Hekapoo’s name, in her own script, shone bright and clear in white light, even amidst the ebony
smoke and the viridescent light from the burning land. It flared for a second, and then it rolled onto
itself, becoming a hollow ball of brightness, flying through the darkened sky like a comet. Nachos
flew behind, in vertiginous pursuit.

The spell dragged Marco into the blackness that rose from below, to a world in which he could see
nothing but himself, and Nachos, and the magic shooting star that would show the way.
Eventually, the meteor crossed a wall of fire, not green but bright red and golden. Marco, without
hesitation, followed behind. The flames did not burn him as he passed through.

He found himself in front of a tall dead spiked tree, the same he had visited last time he had been
here, now the last one standing in the entire Afflicted Forest. Around the place was a bubble of red
and gold fire, Hekapoo’s fire. It shrunk slowly, inch by inch. Calmly, as if in a trance, Marco
dismounted and walked into the sorceresses home.

“Was beginning to think you would not come in time, muscles,” Hekapoo greeted him. She sat
calmly, on her knees, on the floor. The furniture inside the forge-home was gone. In its place
remained only a simple red carpet between round stone walls. Her flame was not but a fading
candle.

“You know I will always find you, H-poo,” Marco spoke. He felt as if he were reading lines from a
script. Inside his mind another voice yelled at him that none of this made sense, that it wasn’t real.
“Two hundred of you, across as many dimensions. I always did find you. I always will.”

“Aw, kid, you make me blush,” she joked. Then she frowned, as if suddenly reminded of
something awful. “This one is going to be a little harder than last time, I am afraid.”

“I take it I haven’t found you yet, then,” Marco continued. “This is a dream. It isn’t real.”

“It is a dream,” Hekapoo agreed. “I wouldn’t go as far as saying it is not real. Maybe it looks like
this, maybe it doesn’t. But I am dying, most of me, and with that, so does my world.”

“How long?” asked the hero of a dozen different epics, Marco of Averx, and of K’Ahleh, and of
Zonst. Marco, of Earth, the real Marco, would have been sad, and scared. In time, so would be the
proud warrior as well. But now it was not the time for grief, it was the time to act, to ask any
question that could help save the Forger of Scissors.

“This aspect of me will be dead by the time you wake up, perhaps for good,” the sorceress admitted. “Apparently, I entered into a bargain without intending to. A ritual of sealing, you know? For a force greater than myself. One you really don’t want to meet before you find me. The price is that I must also be sealed. Because how the hell could it be anything else, right?”

The ancient powers had a taste for irony. They could be called by men and by gods, when either required help.

“Listen carefully, muscles, this part is important: every echo I send out, allows it one of its own of... proportional magnitude. I could risk only two aspects, neither complete.” continued Hekapoo. “I would have not done even that much, if I knew I could keep this evil contained. But there are forces on top of forces here, pacts that must supersede other pacts, and a dark destiny written in the heavens that I cannot fully avert... Wow, that sure got a bit dramatic there, didn’t it?” she smiled, bitterly.

“The prophecy, right?” Marco asked. Hekapoo only shrugged.

“If there is one, I did not hear it this time,” she replied. “And don’t bother telling me. I’ll be erased soon enough, already said most of what I had to say. Honestly, we are wasting time now. I guess, mostly, I am trying to stall. Lame, isn’t it? After living this long, still afraid to die...”

“I’d trade mine for yours, Hekapoo, if the ancient powers didn’t know that for a poor exchange,” older Marco spoke, truthfully. The sorceress laughed in return.

“If that could be done, I would have already traded my life for someone else, kid,” she confessed. “But I wouldn’t do it for you, and you shouldn’t do it for me. There is one you might one day soon have to die for, you know? Save your bargain for her.”

Marco raised an eyebrow. “You said you sent out two aspects of yourself?”

“Yes, one to find you, and one to be found,” Hekapoo intoned. “One to explain, the other to reveal a worthy ally. Look for me to find yourself, and when we next shall meet, our roles shall have reversed.”

“Is the riddle necessary, H-poo?” Marco asked.

“Believe it or not, Marco, it sort of is,” she replied. Right, that was ritual magic for you after all, rules over rules over more rules. “I know, right? Lame times dek!”

They both smiled at that.

The bubble of flames crossed the walls of the place then, and all around them the stone walls became occluded by a bright conflagration, in which red and green fire danced together. Under different circumstances, it would have been almost pretty.

“Why me? Why not Star?” Marco asked, and he knew it would be his last question for her.

“Because what I have shown you is most useful to you. Because I wanted to see you,” Hekapoo smiled. “And because I could not have faced Star. Not after Moon... You know Marco? Star’s mom and I? We were close. You have no idea how much. No one was to know. But I don’t suppose that even matters now. I lo...”

Marco woke up in Jackie’s arms, crying.
It was the hour before sunset and, unlike the night before, the Mewni royal cemetery was packed with people. It was a beautiful place, despite its grim significance: gardens of many-colored flowers and the most vibrant greens, sprinkled with the busts of nobles and the full body statues of former queens atop their lavish crypts. Each sculpture a work of art, and each reflecting the personality of their represented monarch and the artistic style of her times. From the angular fierceness of Solaria’s warring form, to the delicate dancing effigy of Solena, to the ominous empty black pedestal representing dark queen Eclipsa.

Today everyone was here early, the high and the low alike, all wishing to pay tribute and say their goodbyes to one of the most beloved monarchs this land had ever had. And to hear, with perhaps some measure of apprehension, the words of their next queen: Star Butterfly, the Yet-Untitled. A girl with tears made of honey and a heart full of bunnies, but also known for her tempestuousness and a penchant for wreaking havoc on par with a natural disaster. She was a wild card in terms of the future of Mewni, and one mired in rumors which cast shadows over the continuation of the royal line of succession.

Star herself hung back at first, inside the royal marquee, decorated in cerulean blue but flying the black banners of mourning. King River was with her. They waited for the crowds to finish arriving, before it was Star’s turn to address her people. When it came to this sort of thing, Mewni tradition did not call for the king to speak. The king’s power was at most symbolic, while the queen wielded the wand. They needed reassurance not from River, but from Star, their true future ruler. The only one who needed reassurance from King River, was the princess herself.

“IT is time, Sweetheart. You can do this. Moon Pie would be so proud,” he spoke, a tear in his eye.

“Thanks, daddy,” she replied, hugging him lightly.

Star walked out of the royal tent, chin held high, face composed. It felt like she was barely even there, acting in automatic, a puppet mimicry of what her mother would have done, while the real Star curled in inside her head. Her black dress was the perfect balance of royal elegance and appropriate somberness, as the occasion demanded. Her nods and tone controlled and reassuring, while showing just enough of her sorrow to fit the occasion.

“I am sorry. I miss her too. Hekapoo as well! I should have been there, to fight! Who is going to be there now... to... to put me on timeout? To look over us?”

“Bhaaaaaaaaa!”

“Thanks, Rhombulus, Lekmet. We will make it through, don’t worry. It is what my mother would have wanted us to do.”

The words as empty as Star felt. Her eyes scanning the crowd, projecting self-confidence, seeing nothing.

“I know your mom didn’t like us much, she had reasons. Yet she was never cruel. For what is worth, Star, am sorry. Is tragedy.”

“Thank you, Yvgeny.”

“Call Buff Frog.”

She kept sleepwalking. A foot in front of the other. Knowing that if she stopped she would fall down and not be able to stand anymore.
“Princess Star, I have composed an aria of lamentation for the fate of Queen Moon. It would be an honor if you could deign to hear it.”

“Perhaps later, Ruberiot. Thank you.”

Not even anger. Beyond sadness. Just nothingness.

“Star, thanks for inviting us, I am so sorry. If there is anything we can do...”

“Thanks, Jackie.”

“Star...”

He ran to hug her. The guards flinched, but let him through. Like her, he had no words.

“Thank you, Marco. I... I need to keep going.”

“Yes, I know.”

He let go.

----

She stood in a wooden podium. Behind her was the altar, and her mother’s casket. In front of her, forming an ocean of black and brown robes, crested by waves of sullen faces, was the entire kingdom of Mewni. Along with them were: the two remaining members of the high commission, Yvgeny Bulgolyubov and his family, the two humans from Earth, Kelly and Tad, and many more people Star recognized. Somewhere around, unseen, might have been Thomas Lucitor, prince of hell, perhaps Janna too. Janna could have come openly, but she had declined without explanation.

“Moon Butterfly, Queen of Mewni, Honoris High-commissioner of Magic, Protector of the Lands, Preserver of the Peace, Wielder of the Royal Magic Wand, Moon the Undaunted, The Lizard Vanquisher, my mother. A week ago she left us, and in her place there is a hole in the firmament, and in the heart of every citizen of Mewni, including my own. She was just, and wise, and kind, and fierce. She put the kingdom’s needs before her own, in times of plenty and in times of need. She was our light in every cloudy day, and she would not sleep until the least of her subjects was safe from harm...” Hollow words. They meant nothing. They were all true, but they still meant nothing. “She has left us, and none of us can ever hope to fill her shoes. Least of all me.”

It happened then, at that exact moment. Something inside the Star-marionette broke, and the real Star came out. She rose from the depths of her mind with fury and determination, breaking through the resignation and despair. Turning sadness into defiant anger. Crying her resistance to the heavens. Externally, Star did not move, but everyone still felt it when her look turned from one of glazed out emptiness, to a glare made of steel. Her voice boomed with power.

“So, I am not going to,” she continued, going off script. “Not yet, anyways. Not while my mother remains to be avenged. Not while the creature that took her from us yet lives. I will seek that evil out, whatever and wherever it is, and I will end it!”

Star voice roared, her eyes flaming coals that would have frightened Tom himself. The crowds murmured, some in fervent approval, some in abject terror.

“I will not take the crown, not until I have found this abomination and repaid its cruelty a thousandfold! This I promise, with all former Queens of Mewni as my witnesses: with Solena, and Skywynne, and Celena, and Solaria... and Eclipsa as well!” she yelled, her hands grasping the
podium so hard that it broke and splintered.

A quiet tremor moved along the assembled people at the mention of the Queen of Darkness’ name.

“Until then,” Star continued. “You shall have my father, River Johansen, River Butterfly, as your rightful king and regent. And you shall obey him like you would any Queen of Mewni. When I return, I will try my best to be a wise, and kind, and good queen. But not until I have fulfilled my promise.

“I have mourned my mom, privately for days, and now here, among all of you.” She let go of the wooden podium and searched inside her dark formal dress. She extended her right hand in front of herself, the royal magic wand, the symbol of her power, literal and figurative, glowing dark green, pointed at the sky in defiance. “But I am done mourning her. Now, I am going to avenge her!”

“Yes! That’s my girl!” shouted Rhombulus, even as everyone else fell silent with shock and dread.

----

“Star, wait...” Marco ran behind her, even as the crowds parted to let her pass, cowed by the princess’ cold fury.

This wasn’t right. Rhombulus was wrong, this wasn’t Star. Not quite. Sure, she might be impulsive and fierce and often far too ready to fight. But she wasn’t the kind to just pledge murder. He could see that she had terrified her subjects. Even King River seemed disturbed. And, well, Marco was shocked too. It wasn’t that he didn’t understand, it was that he understood only too well what Star was thinking.

The moment she had raised her wand, the moment she had sworn herself to vengeance, the boy couldn’t help but hear the words of the girl named Cass. The fragment of a prophecy that ended in Star’s own death: ‘Behold the dark queen ascending…’.

“Marco, I’ll speak to you before I leave, don’t worry,” she pointed out, calmly, as he finally reached her. “Take good care of Jackie, ok? Sorry for you-know-what.”

Wait, before she left? Was Star planning to leave him behind too? Sure, things had been a little bit tense between them this past few days, but still, Marco had thought it was just a matter of some time, of letting Star grieve and Jackie process her feelings. Even if Star did become queen, he didn’t even consider, didn’t think that they would... well, not this soon.

For a second, he considered telling Star about his dream, about Hekapoo. If there was a place to start the princess quest for revenge it was there. But, well, Marco wasn’t sure he should be helping Star, not with that. He made his way past the confused guards and grabbed her left arm.

“Star, the prophecy,” he finally said, quietly, so others wouldn’t hear. His eyes pleading for Star not to go down this path. She turned around, wand leveled at him.

“Marco, I don’t care,” she replied, also a whisper. “Nothing has felt right these days, nothing until now. I have to do this. If avenging my mom is wrong, if it is the evil thing to do... then, well, call me a villainess.”

She gritted the last part through her teeth, mindful of the potential audience not too far from them. Marco sighed, and let her go. It is not as if he could blame her.

The wake went on, and the funeral as well. In the absence of the princess, it was an even gloomier affair than what it would have already been before. Marco spent the night wondering, whether
maybe Star was right, and he was wrong. What would he do or not do, were something to happen to his own parents? Or to Jackie? Or to Star?

---

“I summon the All-Seeing Eye,” Star begun. As she said the words, she knew it was a terrible idea, perhaps one of the very worst she had ever had. To do this alone, in the middle of the Forest of Certain Death, after the ways in which the spell had backfired the last time she tried it... it was madness! But the spell was her only lead. It was the only way she could think of to find out anything more about the flaming monstrosity that her father had seen murder her mom.

She had seen Mewni, that last time she tried the spell. She had seen Omnitraxus die, and Toffee, and Glossaryck, even if she hadn’t seen who killed them. What was the chance all those were not connected? How likely was it, really, that those three and Moon were unrelated? Star wasn’t sure how the pieces fit together, she knew only that they did, somehow. Besides, even if the spell backfire wasn’t linked to whatever had happened back on Mewni, the Seeing Eye itself was supposed to show her what she wished to see, if only she could get it to work properly.

“To tear a hole into the sky...” she continued, bracing herself for madness.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” spoke a soft female voice behind her. The tone was firm, yet casual. Not a threat. There was no surprise, nor fear, woven into the words. It was a statement of fact. A friendly warning. “That’s not a spell you want to be casting in this state, believe me.”

Star turned around to see a young girl, perhaps her own age. Her skin was very pale, almost gray. Her purple eyeshadow matched her dress. Her flowing hair was about as long as Star’s own, but formed of green curls rather than straight blond locks.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, dark magic, yada yada,” Star countered. She wasn’t sure if she knew the stranger. She seemed, well, familiar somehow. She had met so many people that day at her mom’s wake, so many strangers offering condolences, both heartfelt as well as insincere. “Look, it is just a scrying spell, and there is something I need to find...”

“A scrying spell? Oh, dear,” the strange girl exclaimed, taking a hand to her mouth in surprise. Star had the weirdest feeling that she was missing something. “Is that what you think that is?”

“Well, yeah,” Star spoke. She felt annoyed at the stranger. How dare she interrupt her now that she had decided to do everything in her power to find her mom’s killer? How dare she presume to know what Star’s spells did? No one ever knew how Star’s magic worked! Even her mom would have known nothing about this one. “It is an old spell, and a bit spooky. But I have done this before, alright?”

“Yeah, so have I,” the stranger mused. Her tone slow, drifting in contemplation, or recollection. “But I also didn’t know better back then. I wasn’t really that much older than you, when I scribbled that one into the book...”

“When you what?!?” Star shouted in shock. She turned back to the stranger, pointing her wand straight at her. The magical instrument glowed with deadly power. It was then that the mewman princess noticed the spade marks in the stranger’s cheeks. “Wait a second! You are Eclipsa!”

“Well, yes,” the girl shrugged. “I thought it was obvious, dear. By the way, thanks for including me in that little speech of yours. It was very moving. It is selfish of me, but it feels so nice after all the other things people are saying about me these days...”
Star didn’t move her wand one millimeter. For an instant she wondered if perhaps she should be a tad bit more cautious about the names she swore stuff on. Eclipsa was evil, and like, super dangerous. Wasn’t she?

“Wait, but aren’t you supposed to be like, you know... crystallized?” Star whispered the last word, still struggling with the notion that she was talking to her ninth great-grandmother, who looked her age, and was also perhaps the greatest villain to ever have lived in Mewni.

“I was,” her ancestor admitted, looking sad momentarily. “For a long while, apparently. I only really got out recently. You see, your mom and I made a deal...”

“... that you would be free as soon as Toffee died,” finished Star. And now Toffee is dead.”

She noticed that this meant she had confirmation that the visions the All-Seeing Eye spell had shown her last time corresponded to reality. All the more reason she should cast it again, no matter the risk. Then, she thought of something, and the brightness within the wand increased, turning a sickly shade of green.

“Wait! How do I know it wasn’t you? You have been free for days! Did you...” she choked. “Did you kill my mother?!”

“Oh dear! Absolutely not!” Eclipsa exclaimed, looking genuinely shocked. “I liked Moon. She was such a sweet kid. I mean, I know she was not fond of me, but I would never hurt her...”

“How do I know you aren’t lying?” pressed Star. Anger burned through her, ready to be unleashed at the slightest sign that the woman before her was the one responsible for her mom’s death.

“Well, you don’t,” the Queen of Darkness reasoned, seemingly unconcerned about the most powerful weapon in Mewni being pointed directly at her chest. “I mean, if I had done it, I would certainly lie. Even if I were to tell you a spell to make me tell the truth, why would you believe that is true either? I can tell you I want the same thing you want, to see the creature that killed Moon gone. But I suppose only you can decide whether you believe that or not. Maybe, well, maybe I can show you. Perhaps I can be of assistance?”

“You mean helping me find the thing that killed my mom? To destroy it?” Star replied, doubtfully. But she lowered her aim an inch, and the wand’s glow slowly faded away. This was bad, recruiting the evil queen as an ally. Then again, wasn’t that the same her mom had done?

“I am afraid not,” Eclipsa answered regretfully. “I mean, I am sorry, I just got out, you have no idea what that’s like. I want a little while to just smell the roses, eat the candy I didn’t have all those years. I know it sounds horrible. I am really sorry about Moon, really, I swear, by my own mother, and my daughter, and all the queens before me or since. But I just got my freedom, I don’t want to dedicate it to vengeance...”

The princess’ heart sank. Here she was, talking to the Queen of Darkness herself, and it was Star whose heart seemed to be filled with hate, the one who longed for revenge. She though for a second, about the scared faces of her subjects, about what Marco had said. But then, she thought about the body; the unmoving body in the glass casket, the cold flesh that had been her mom.

“What if I do want to do it? Vengeance, I mean,” she asked, her tone ice-cold. “Could you help me still somehow? What about the spell you gave my mom?”

“Are you certain that’s what you want?” replied Eclipsa surprised. “I can do that. But that spell does require a magical contract. I am afraid that part is sort of... fundamental to the way it works.”
The green-haired royal seemed to ponder the issue for a moment.

“Perhaps, well, if you truly are sure...” she trailed off an instant before continuing, as if organizing her thoughts. “That speech you gave, what you said before, that would work. You can promise to me you will find Moon’s killer and destroy it, before you become queen. That would be acceptable in exchange for the spell, and it is what you plan to do anyways. Isn’t it?”

Star hesitated for a second. It was one thing to make that promise to her subjects, in the heat of the moment. It was something that she could probably still take back at this point. Her mother would have known the political cost of doing that, she would have told her it was a bad image for the new queen to be seen as going back on a promise as her first royal act. But it was at least theoretically possible. This seemed a lot more permanent somehow.

“If you are not absolutely sure, though, you really shouldn’t do it,” Eclipsa offered helpfully.

Star felt ashamed. She never even wanted to be queen! And, well, she had to stand by her words either way. She had to avenge her mom, and she couldn’t do so if she had to assume all the responsibilities of Queen of Mewni at the same time.

“I swear I will not be queen, until my mother has been avenged.” Star extended a hand. Then she smiled, “with Eclipsa as my witness.”

The former queen chuckled in response. As she took Star’s hand into her own, a ribbon of darkness coiled around their outstretched arms, and the princess felt a tingling sensation. Eclipsa leaned down and whispered the words of the spell into her ear.

“So, will that really kill anything?” Star asked.

“Any creature, and anything living or undead, and most denizens of hell or heaven,” replied Eclipsa. “As long as you hit the heart. Or well, the closest equivalent.”

“Wow, that sounds really... powerful. I am kinda sad I don’t have the rest of your chapter,” the princess admitted. “I lost the book, and I think, I am not sure, but I think, it is gone now, for good.”

“Well, I lost the book once too,” Eclipsa replied pensively. “When I... went away, from Mewni. I sort of made one of my own after that: a few things I remembered, a few things I found out after. Unfortunately, I was never diligent enough at it to get even all of what was in my old chapter in there, let alone all the other queen’s spells.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” echoed Star. Remembering her own experiences with trying to keep her own notebook of spells after losing the book to Ludo. Meanwhile, Eclipsa began rummaging through her dress.

“Here,” she handed Star a small bundle of pages, sewed together with two black covers made of what seemed to be something like fossilized rose petals. “Take it.”

Star looked surprised at the little notebook. “Whoa, are you sure about that?” she asked. Was Eclipsa simply giving away the notes she went through so much effort to reconstruct?

“I don’t think I will need this anymore.” The girl winked at Star. “Besides, it’s not really that much use without the wand.”

“Um... thanks!” Star replied, as she took the book carefully into her hands, almost reverentially. She looked at it, thoughtfully, then back at Eclipsa. She was definitely not what the princess had expected. “You know? You don’t really seem evil...”
“Well, thank you. Neither do you.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the first chapter of this fic which has elements from what I like to call the "Habit mythos". Meaning that some elements from the excellent fic: A Habit Hard to Break are considered fanon in this fic as well. I call it a mythos and not a universe or a fic-of-fic, because I am not aiming at full consistency here (for one, Marco did not come back from Hekapoo's dimension with PTSD in this fic). There is also no need to read Habit to understand this fic, I will explain the things I use from there as it becomes important to know them. You should still read Habit, because it is amazing.

Special thanks to Grade_A_Sexual and Akeara4 (Habit's authors) for helping me understand the Habitverse and its rules, and thus break them in style.

Another thing I want to clarify, is that while I am obviously using her Season 3 appearances to inform the character, the plan was always to have Eclipsa appear here and do pretty much what she just did. Don't believe me? Go back to the first comment under Chapter 17. The secret is #1 and the password is ancientevilunawoken

**Coming up next:** Chapter 20: Paved with Good Intentions
Chapter 20: Paved with Good Intentions

“You know, Marco, when you said you wanted to hang out today, this is not what I had in mind,” Tom spoke, irritated, as he guided the other boy lower and lower through the deepest reaches of his corner of the underworld.

He led through black decrepit stairwells, through stone bridges over burning lava pools, through pitch-black tunnels full of nameless horrors. By all rights he should hate the human, see him as a rival, and plot to dispose of him at the earliest opportunity. That was his nature.

“What did you think I was going to ask you then, Tom?” Marco retorted, as he nervously scuttled through the narrow downwards ledge, a bottomless abyss extending ominously to his right. Not quite bottomless in the literal sense, Tom knew. But the thing at the bottom of that pit would devour you before you realized you had reached the ground. So, well, the fall might as well be endless, really.

“Honestly? I thought you were here so I could destroy you at some other game. I am still trying to beat my record, you know? Pulverize you sixty to zero, or better. Come on, I know we both can do it!” He laughed and gave Marco a playful pat on the shoulder. The human yelped in terror as he lost his balance, nearly falling to his demise. Tom held him back with an outstretched arm. Nature be damned, he had grown to like the whelp. Not enough to know what Star saw in him, of course, but, well, that was none of his business. “Nah, seriously, Marco, why do you want to see it?”

“Well, Tom, I don’t know what you have heard about Star’s speech, yesterday, at her mom’s wake...” Marco began.

Tom smiled bitterly to himself. “All of it, Marco,” he replied with a shrug. “I was there too.”

The look of confusion in the human boy’s face was absolutely worth it. “Wait, you were there? I didn’t see you there. Star didn’t see you there either... I think.”

“I know,” Tom replied with a smug grin. “Unlike you, I know how to be discreet when lurking where I am not invited.” He stated, taking a friendly jab at the other boy.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Marco retorted, picking up on the tone of the words, if perhaps not the substance of the observation.

Tom gave Marco his best look of mock disappointment, trying to impress upon the boy just how dense he was being right now. It was mostly a calculated act, of course. He didn’t really care about
it anymore. But it was worth reminding the human that, sometimes, Tom too had been wronged in their interactions.

Finally, the human caught on, “Ah, oh, right… the Blood Moon Ball thing! Look, man, I am sorry I crashed your date with Star. I was way out of line.”

‘Point, Tom’, the demon thought to himself with some satisfaction.

He shrugged graciously, relishing the rare opportunity to take the human boy down a peg for once. “Apology accepted, Marco.”

After all, it really hadn’t been that big of a deal in retrospect. His plan to dance with Star that night, to maybe have their two souls chosen to be bonded by the Blood Moon, seemed awfully optimistic in hindsight. He didn’t know which lucky couple the mysterious celestial body had decided to join that night. But, as much as it pained him to admit it, he suspected it had been a wiser pairing than the mewman princess and himself would have been. Even if their relationship had somehow gone better than it did - and Tom wasn’t sure how it could have - Star simply had enough destinies to worry about, between crowns and prophecies, to add something like that to the mix.

“But, Tom, if you were there…” Marco continued, switching back to more recent matters. “Weren’t you worried about what Star said? Aren’t you worried about what she might try to do?”

“Of course I am, Marco.” The demon prince’s expression became far more serious for a moment. “But, well, I didn’t think there was much I could do back there, and I didn’t want to scare the locals. Many of them knew about me, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t afraid of demons showing up, especially at funerals. Given the fright Star was putting them through, I didn’t think it was a good idea for me to make an appearance.”

Not that he hadn’t considered it, when he saw Star’s look of furious determination as she walked down from the podium and past the crowd, foregoing mourning for retribution. Whether he had wanted to advise her against it, or offer to help her, he didn’t quite know.

“Thanks for trying to stop her,” Tom added after a moment. Then, he shrugged once more. “Not that I expected it to work.”

“Yeah, neither did I,” Marco admitted.

“She just does whatever she wants,” both of them intoned in unison and chuckled nervously.

They fell into a short but uncomfortable silence, as they made their way through a cave with teeth-like stalagmites, which might or might not have once been something’s actual teeth.

Marco was the first to speak. “Do you think she is right? To seek vengeance for her mom, I mean.”

Tom shrugged. He truly didn’t know. His heart told him yes, while his mind, and Brian, would have said no. It was a treacherous road Star was taking, almost like the volcanic maw the two of them were now descending into. In the end, though, it was her road to take or not take. Tom harbored no illusions that he could influence Star’s decision there. Maybe Marco could, but he doubted even that.

There was an island inside a hellish caldera, reachable by a lead boat rowed by faceless demons. On the island stood a tower, and there, down in its bottommost basement, the room Marco had asked about.

“You know Star has one of those too, right? In upper Mewni,” Tom pointed up.
In fact, Star’s Room of Maps was far easier to access than his own. What was with demons and placing all their important rooms in the deepest and most remote corners of their domains? He would have to ask his mom someday. There were some things of demon tradition that truly didn’t make sense to him, even now.

“I don’t want to tell Star about this, not until I know I am right,” Marco answered firmly. He hadn’t told the Lucitor prince much either, just that he might have a possible lead on Moon’s killer. “If I am wrong, I don’t want to give her false hope. And if I am right, well, I still don’t know whether or not I should tell her...”

“Marco, you need to let Star make her own decisions here,” Tom replied solemnly. His words were met with a raised eyebrow and a quizzical stare on the part of the boy. Clearly, there were still some areas in which it was not exactly easy for the demon prince to credibly claim the moral high ground. “Fine, call me a hypocrite! Doesn’t mean I am wrong, Marco!”

Marco nodded, “No, Tom, you are right. It’s just... If she ends up hurting herself, I don’t think I could forgive myself.”

“I don’t think I could forgive you, either,” Tom said in a joking tone. It was no joke, and he hoped the human knew that.

“Thanks,” the boy replied, with an eye roll.

There was a long beat of silence as they started descending down the final flight of ebony stairs.

“Marco, you know you are an infuriatingly lucky bastard, right?” Tom said a second after. In truth, he wasn’t even thinking of the boy’s human girlfriend, though well, that too. He meant it because of Star. That was luck enough for anyone. “Just want that to be clear.”

“I know, man, I know,” he replied earnestly. Then, with a grin, “and you are dating Janna... my condolences.”

“Oh, come on, she is not as bad as you think,” Tom retorted as he pushed the heavy iron doors open. He smirked at Marco. “She is way worse!”

The human boy’s incipient laugher was cut short at the view of the Room of Maps. It was indeed a sight to behold, Tom had to admit. The floor was crystal glass, perfectly transparent and hard as diamond. Underneath, carved on black volcanic stone, was a perfect representation of the ten thousand domains of hell: islands of ebony rock, each detailed to perfection, connected by narrow bridges that would probably not fall to the lava below until the day of judgment itself. The endless pool of magma, underneath it all, represented the domain of The Morning Star, the core of hell, and it showed no known or fixed features. The ceiling of the cavern reflected the light through a series of golden inverted spires, only partly approximating the alien geometries of the heavenly dimensions. In between those two, floated maps of every known mortal world.

Parchment balloons and flying leaflets hung in mid air, magically suspended. Each of them was a map of the dimension it represented in the larger arrangement. If you were to look at the globes floating above the stretch of volcanic stone that mirrored Tom’s own domain within hell, for example, you would find the disc-shaped map of Mewnie, right above the miniature of the Lucitor palace. You would also find there a floating leaflet for the tiny dimension hosting St Olga’s, and a large globe representing Earth. If you unrolled the later in just the right way, it would give you a map of the broader universe of Marco’s home dimension, with all its stars, planets, and galaxies, updating in real time as their relative positions changed. There were dozens of dimensions which floated directly above Tom’s family lands. They were the ones to which his carriage could travel
unimpeded. Then again, those were only a handful among the countless dimensions floating along the nearly infinite room.

“Well, Marco,” he chided his companion, who was still staring dumbfounded at the place. “Good luck finding anything in here. Let me know when you start going mad!”

To his surprise, Marco just grinned. “Tom, did I ever tell you about the time I spent sixteen years chasing Hekapoo to get a pair of scissors?”

“You did not,” Tom replied. Sixteen years? Marco wasn’t even fifteen years old! Was that a joke? He tried not to have his own confusion show, but Marco’s smug look told the demon prince he had not succeeded in that. ‘Point, Marco’, whatever!

“I was older back then,” Marco shrugged. His tone of voice had changed: more confident, more mature. Would almost have been hot, if Tom were into that. “I learned a lot of things chasing H- poo. Magic of my own. Nothing like Star, only a few spells here and there, always with a price. But when I got back, I slowly began to forget. I think I needed to forget. I would have been too damaged otherwise. But I had a dream, two days ago. I dreamed of Hekapoo, and I think she was really there, and when I woke up I still remembered a bit of who I was during that dream, of my older self... I remembered a spell, a spell to find things.”

“So,” Tom commented, still unsure whether he believed the other teen. “You are going to use that spell to locate the creature that killed Queen Moon? To help Star take revenge?”

Marco shook his head. “No. The spell can only locate things I can name, in a language understood by the spell itself. I remember about fifty words of Riradesh right now, but even if I were fully fluent in it again, I don’t think I would know the name of the thing King River described.”

“Then?” Tom asked, curious.

“I think it can find Hekapoo,” Marco suggested.

“Marco, isn’t Hekapoo...” Tom began. Hekapoo was dead. This whole thing had sounded fishy from the beginning, but now the demon prince was starting to suspect that Marco might be going mad with grief, just as affected by the events in Mewni as Star was. Tom shuddered.

“I don’t know. I don’t think she is dead, or not completely dead,” Marco said. “If the spell works, if the dream was real, then she must be out there, somehow.”

“Ok,” Tom reasoned. He had certainly known of stranger things in heaven and hell. Nothing lost with trying. “Let’s test this spell of yours, then.”

“Well,” Marco seemed nervous. “Remember when I said there was a price for every spell I knew? This one’s is bad. For everything found, I forget something of the same kind, Tom. So to use it to find a person means forgetting someone. I don’t think I lost anything when casting it in a dream, but if this works... What if it’s Jackie? What if it’s Star?”

Tom shuddered, understanding. So it was that kind of magic. The demon prince was starting to believe, despite himself, that Marco wasn’t entirely talking out of his ass. It fit too much with what he knew of certain magics to be a complete fabrication. Still, this was to help Star. Tom would have happily traded turning Marco into a vegetable to have the mewman feel better again. He might even do the same to himself.

“Look at the bright side. It could be Janna,” the demon prince joked. A moment later, a pang in his chest reminded him that he himself would never want to forget Janna, no matter how annoying the
girl was sometimes.

Marco chuckled. “If I forget you, do I also forget Naysaya?”

Then, with a look of determination suddenly taking over his face, Marco began intoning a litany of twelve words in a language even Tom didn’t recognize (and he spoke well over six hundred). Golden light steamed from the human boy’s breath over his closed fist, and he began drawing a complicated script in the air, one that expanded from the center and towards all sides, without the single line of the word ever being broken. The demon prince recognized a few glyphs, like fire, which was similar to the equivalent in the ancient tongue of the lower planes. The more complicated parts were unknown to him. Clearly Marco wasn’t kidding when he said he could cast magic. Better never tell Janna of this.

The script coiled into itself, became a sphere of brightness and... fizzled out in mid air. Marco looked puzzled at his hand.

“Well, that looked magic to me,” Tom shrugged. “Maybe you got the name wrong?” He hoped Marco wouldn’t lose any memories for a miscast ritual, but he wasn’t sure.

“No, Tom,” Marco replied. “The name is right: ‘She who commands the blade of fire that crosses the empty place between places’, Hekapoo. Maybe... maybe there is not enough of her for the spell to recognize her.” The boy clenched both fists and looked down in despair.

“Well, Marco,” Tom drew closer and rested a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “It was a long shot anyways, right? Star will find another way.”

“No. Wait!” Marco’s eyes lit up again. “I know where to find Hekapoo, if she is to be found anywhere. She has to be, otherwise she would not have sent that dream!”

Tom let go of Marco as the boy began the spell anew. The Lucitor prince wasn’t sure the dream was truly a vision now, even if the magic was real. How likely was it that Marco had just gotten a normal dream that jogged back some old memories? Or that whatever had sealed those memories inside him, possibly for his own good, had died with Hekapoo? But he said nothing, and let Marco try again.

Once more the boy drew fire, and blade, and many more glyphs the demon did not recognize. But then, around what he swore up and down was Hekapoo’s name, he drew the crown of thorns, the twelve-pointed circle, Arus’Morgáth. Tom flinched in surprise, astonished by the fact that the human kid knew that unmistakable symbol. “Marco, what are you trying to write?”

“Just ‘Hekapoo’s dimension’,” he replied absently, his concentration elsewhere, going into the spell.

“That doesn’t mean dimension, Marco,” Tom clarified, unsure if the other boy was listening. “I think you just wrote ‘Hekapoo’s domain’.”

“Yeah, sure, that,” replied Marco, completely missing the significance of the fact.

As he said that, the words in the air coiled around themselves and became a ball of lightning. It began moving around the room. Tom and Marco followed. As they moved, maps moved out of their way, only to return to their places a second after. Eventually, the sphere came to rest inside a cluster of maps: three large parchment spheres and dozens of smaller strips. It divided into many lights, illuminating the whole set of charts and globes.

“Tom?” Marco asked, without looking away from the constellation of maps. “Can you take us
here?"

Tom looked at the path below, the geography of hell that connected his own domain with that of the Forger of Scissors. There was a path, many even, but they all passed through the same place: the huge citadel in the middle of the floor, all claw-like castles and needle-like spires. It was a place of countless terrors, even to a prince of hell. He should have known. After all, in hell, all roads led to Dis. To Sam’s domain.

“It is not going to be easy, Marco. Not like going to St O’s, or Earth, or Mewni,” Tom shuddered. “There is someone I need to ask for a favor. It will cost me greatly. It might cost my family greatly too. And it will be dangerous, for all of us.”

“More dangerous than Star finding this same path and going on her own? Or that any other thing she might try?” Marco asked, his features harder than the demon had ever seen them before.

He had to admit the boy had a point. It was not like him saying no at this point would stop Star from trying. Tom shuddered at the thought of the princess trying to forge a way through Dis by force. Even having Marco keep quiet wouldn’t deter her from finding a way eventually. Maybe she would even try to punch a hole into the fabric of the multiverse by force of will alone. Without scissors, going through Dis, dealing with Sam, might in truth be the safest path, even if it was anything but safe.

“No, probably not,” he replied finally. He was, to his annoyance, beginning to understand what Star saw in the other boy. He also felt he now had some idea about what had really driven the human to crash the party back then, the night of the Blood Moon Ball. “Alright, Marco. I’ll do this, for Star. On one condition: you are all in, no hesitations, no divided loyalties. We both do this for Star.”

----

Marco had been thinking of Tom’s final admonition for hours by the time he reached Earth. He had asked the demon prince for one of his suit jackets, a bit of hair gel, and to borrow his royal carriage for the rest of the day.

It turned out driving the demonic hearse was easier than the boy had suspected. One needed only say where, and the undead horse did the rest. Marco even talked to the horse for a while, as he sorted out his conflicted feelings. The skeleton was still bitter that nobody had told it of its demise for years, Nonetheless, it did his job without complaint. What it definitely wasn’t, however, was any sort of particularly insightful audience for the human’s personal troubles.

As the vehicle materialized in front of Jackie’s home, Marco looked at the bouquet of roses in his hands, unnaturally red and with a light all of their own, as if flame burned beneath the petals. Hell flowers. Tom had given him his word that they were safe, but the Earth boy still had his doubts. This would be hard enough without his gift trying to eat them before they could talk, or burning his girlfriend’s house down.

He walked to the entrance and rang the doorbell. Jackie opened up, looking amazing, in that effortless way she always did. She looked him up and down, and burst out laughing. “Marco, you look so… fancy?” she said, uncertain. She paused for a moment, looking behind him. “Sweet ride, though!”

“Okay, okay,” he conceded, taking off Tom’s jacket and tousling his hair back to normal. Jackie was right, this wasn’t him. He just had wanted to make their last date special. “Jackie Lynn Thomas. I am here to take you… on the ultimate date!”
Jackie looked at him, first puzzled, then a little bit sadly. A flash in her eyes told him she was reading more in his expression than what he wished to show. Jackie always kept talking about them reading each other’s mind, and Marco was often half-convincing she could do that to him already.

She took the bouquet and motioned him over, “Marco, come on in.”

Marco followed her sheepishly, and a bit disappointed. He had wanted to treat Jackie today. It might be the last time he saw her for a while. She deserved better, of course, so much better, but a great date was all he could give her now. Maybe, if he survived, he would one day be able to make it up to her. Was there an easy way to tell your girlfriend you had to go away, for months at least, possibly forever, to cross the depths of hell with your other girlfriend?

“What is this really about, Marco?” Jackie finally broke the silence, as she put the roses in a vase. The water under them heated immediately to a soft boil, and stayed there, bubbling slowly. “No offense, but with that face you look less like you are asking me out, and more like you are on your way to another funeral.”

“Remember the dream I told you about?” Marco begun. He would have wanted to give the two of them a few more hours together, before he had to explain. But it was clear his heart wouldn’t have been in it anyways. This was already too painful for him, and in a minute he might cause the same pain to Jackie. That idea felt even worse than his own misery. “I went to visit Tom. We found a lead. I am telling Star.”

“Yes, Jackie, I know,” Marco admitted. “And no, I am not sure. But if I don’t help her, I think she will do it anyways. I want to be there, to protect her if I can. If not, then at least to support her. And I want to help her honestly. It would be one thing to tell her not to do it, another to withhold this information from her.”

“Yeah, because she has always been so forthcoming with the truth...” muttered Jackie. She shook her head. “No, dude, you are right. Telling her is the right thing to do, just promise me you will try to stop her from doing something really stupid.”

“I will,” Marco swore. Then he looked into Jackie’s eyes, sadly. “Which is why I need to be going with her.”

“Well, duh, of course,” Jackie replied with a wave of her hand, completely missing the point. Marco gulped.

“It is a long journey without the scissors. I don’t know when, or if, we will be back,” he finally admitted. It hurt to speak, he felt tears welling inside his eyes. “Jackie, I love you. But it wouldn’t be fair for me to ask that you wait until I return. I think... I think we should break up!”

They stared at each other in silence for a while, then he continued. There was a lot he wanted to say, and yet nothing that could be nearly enough, “I love you, like you have no idea! But, well, Star needs me now, and... you don’t. If I do come back, and you are free then, and you still want to... no, let’s leave it at that for now. I am sorry.”

Oh god, he felt like such an asshole. Jackie didn’t deserve this. But he had to be there for Star. Jackie was strong. She would do alright. And she was kind. She would understand. Still, Marco felt oh so very small at that moment. Jackie simply stared at him and blinked.
“Marco, I love you too, but sometimes you are kind of an idiot,” she stated calmly. It was like a slap to the face.

“I know,” he agreed. He began walking back towards the door, shoulders hunched, deflated.

“Not what I meant, Diaz!” Jackie shouted. “The reason you are an idiot, is because it is obvious I am going with you two, dude!”

When Marco turned back, Jackie was smiling, and still shaking her head.

“Wait! Jackie, no, that’s even worse. I definitely cannot ask you to...” he began.

“You are not asking, Marco,” she retorted. “And I am not asking you either. Even if you do go ahead and break up with me right now, I am still going. Star is still my friend too, despite that stupid voyeur spell, you know?”

“Jackie, no! This is going to be really dangerous!” yelled Marco. He couldn’t bear the idea of Jackie dying or getting hurt, and the hard truth was that it was not an improbable outcome in the least. “I mean, the way Tom spoke of the way there... we are going through the bowels of hell, literally! And, well, at the end there is this... this thing that was able to overpower Hekapoo and Star’s mom. We could die. You... you could die.”

“Shhh, Marco, it’s ok,” she said, walking towards him, placing a hand on his shoulder, wiping a tear from his face. She flashed him what he had begun to call her ‘Prince Jack’ grin. “I will protect you.”

They kissed. Or, well, Jackie kissed him.

Marco was grateful, and guilty. He couldn’t help but think that he was still the one dragging Jackie into all of this, putting her at risk. But, on the other hand, he didn’t know what he would do without her support, without her strength. He could try to be there for Star but, without Jackie, who would be there for him? He couldn’t ask her to do that, of course. But he was weak enough not to push her away, if she insisted.

“So, Marco, are we still together?” Jackie finally broke the kiss and asked him. “Because, honestly, I would prefer that, if we ever do break up, it’s because one of us no longer cares for the other, not because you are silly enough to think I won’t follow you into hell.”

Tom was right, Marco thought, he was an infuriatingly lucky bastard.

“Jackie, I truly couldn’t ask for a better girlfriend,” Marco admitted and nodded.

“No, you couldn’t. Now, go deliver your other girlfriend the news, dude, before she does something crazy...er. We can do your fancy date when we are all back. I guess I should start packing. How do you think is the weather in hell?” Jackie laughed and pushed Marco out of the house. Then, turning serious for a moment, she added, “By the way, if you don’t come back for me, I’ll ask Janna. I know Tom is going after Star, and Janna practically lives with him now. And if you make me go down that route, Marco, I am afraid I will have to kick your ass when I do get there.”

----

Tom marched back towards his room, his promise to Marco weighing heavy on his mind. Sam was an old friend of the family, and he had a strange, sometimes disturbing, fondness for Tom. But having Sam’s friendship was like having a pet viper: that it didn’t bite you didn’t mean the venom
wasn’t there, always at the ready. Sam was ancient when Tom’s oldest ancestors were young, and powerful in a way that only the Astray One himself could top. If the other demon decided to hurt Marco, or Janna, or Star, well, there was nothing Tom could do to stop him.

“Shadow chains!” cried a familiar voice as the prince Lucitor entered his own chambers. Black ribbons of living darkness coiled around his arms, tying them behind his back. On his bed, naked underneath her open black silk robe, legs crossed, Janna sat grinning. Strewn around her were half a dozen books. Ancient tomes of power, older than the Kingdom of Mewni itself.

“Where did you get those?” the demon inquired. He tugged at the arcane bindings holding him. They were strong, much stronger than he expected from Janna. But not nearly strong enough. His eyes lit red and he burned through the conjured restraints with ease.

“Come on! You could have at least pretended those worked,” Janna pouted. “It took me hours to get that spell to work!”

“You really are taking this seriously, aren’t you?” Tom replied, somewhat impressed. Even without much natural talent, the human girl practiced magic with a diligence he had seldom ever seen in anyone. After the trip to St O’s, she had, if anything, redoubled her efforts. “Still, Janna, you didn’t answer. Where are the books from?”

“Your family library, duh,” she shrugged. It was not an apology.

Tom raised a hand and all tomes floated gently to a nearby bookcase. He was beginning to learn it wasn’t even worth it getting angry at Janna’s antics and, anyways, he had more serious worries in his mind right now.

“Next time, Janna, ask,” he scolded her, uselessly. “There are books there I really wouldn’t want to have you damage... and books that are more likely to damage you instead.” The flesh-eating ones were among the least dangerous in that later category.

“Aw, someone looks sourer than usual!” the wannabe witch observed. “Heard Marco was visiting. Jealous much?”

“No! ...maybe,” Tom hesitated. “But, anyways, that’s not the point. There is a call I have to make. It is a delicate one, something that could help Star...”

“It is always about Star, isn’t it?” Janna grumbled.

“Janna, she lost her mom,” Tom observed, glaring back at her. What was with Janna and Star recently? The troublemaker girl had always resented Star on some level, both for her magic and, if he was honest rather than humble, for what she meant to him. But lately it was worse than ever. She bristled at every mention of the mewman princess, and had even refused to attend Moon’s wake. “I thought she was your friend too!”

“A friend?” Janna raised an eyebrow. “Is that what she is to you, Tom? Really?”

“Yes,” he replied annoyed, a few sparks of fire dancing through his fingers. “Yes, that is what she is to me. What I am trying to be to her, Janna. I am trying to be the friend she needs now.”

“Sure, sure,” Janna nodded. “Not like you are trying to take advantage of her grief to fuck her again, right?”

The demon prince’s eyes glowed red at that comment. A strong wind filled the room, coming out of nowhere. Tom’s hair flew around him, his body rising into the air as flames exploded below. A
guttural voice replacing his usual boyish tone. “NO. I am honestly trying to be a good person, and it hurts, and it is hard, and it is driving me absolutely fucking insane! But by Satan and Belial, I am going to do the right thing this time! And I would appreciate it if, for once, you didn’t imply that I have to be the bad guy!”

Janna smirked, and got up from the bed. She let her black cloak hit the ground, exposing her naked body. “Ah, but Tom, I like it when you are the bad guy. If you are not going to be bad to Star, then how about being bad to me?”

Wait, was that what this was about? A come-on!? Now?

Tom didn’t have time for these games. There was so much he needed to do, so much to arrange. Star needed him! At the same time, he couldn’t help but notice the sunset allure of the witch’s naked body, her olive skin taking on an almost amber glow as it reflected the fires of hell. A playful impish spark danced inside her eyes.

The demon prince realized, at that moment, how, *ahem*, frustrated he had been this past week, worrying about Star, burying down feelings of his own that the mewman definitely shouldn’t have to deal with. That he managed to be a decent person didn’t mean the feelings weren’t there. It certainly didn’t mean that it didn’t hurt to be around his ex. Janna’s suggestion offered him an outlet.

“Fine!” he shouted. Honestly, he needed to unwind. If he called Sam in this state, who knows what might happen.

Tom raised a hand and Janna’s body began floating up towards him, like a marionette pulled from strings. She delighted in her helplessness, a grin like that of a mad woman. He moved his claw across the air, and a whip of fire lashed at her from nowhere, hitting her arm, burning the skin. She moaned. She fucking moaned of pleasure like if he had just given her the most sensual caress. Janna was such a freak. It was perhaps her best feature.

She lifted her own hand, and Tom felt himself being yanked towards her by some unseen force. He could have resisted it. He didn’t.

His body smashed against Janna’s and she wrapped her legs around him. The demon prince controlled the flames, made them vanish before he seriously hurt the human girl. No matter how fast she was improving, he didn’t trust her to put up her own defenses. She craved the pain a bit too much sometimes, it made even Tom uneasy. But, right now, as she began unbuttoning his coat and then his shirt, the Lucitor boy could almost forget the burning signs of unhealthiness in what they were doing.

He kissed her. Then, in an impulsive decision, he bit her lower lip and pulled back. A metallic taste filled his mouth as he drew a single drop of blood. He looked down into her eyes for signs of fear or distress. What he saw, was hunger. A hunger echoing his own. Janna was the only person he knew, that didn’t recoil of Tom’s darkest impulses, who didn’t want him to suppress them. She fetishized his darkest side; embraced it. It wasn’t exactly healthy and it wasn’t exactly safe, but it felt good. It felt good to let go; and to be loved for it.

She traced a line through his pants with her finger, a thin tendril of blue flame burning away at the fabric. The demon’s skin barely felt her weak spell, but the clothes ripped and smoldered nonetheless. Soon they were embracing naked in mid air. Tom dug his claws into her back.

She whimpered appreciatively. “Tom, damn it! Fuck me!”
He did. He plunged into her. Gently at first, but deep. She clamped her legs around his waist and begun her own hip motions. Tom took the invitation for what it was and began to thrust hard and fast. He could feel her heart beating even through her howling in his ear. Lightning and fire danced across her skin as she drank deep from his own demonic power. It was monstrously dangerous, but the demon prince dared not interrupt her. It was not clear to him which sensation was the most intense for the witch, the sex or the magic, or if there was indeed a difference between the two.

They floated down towards his bed, all around them a rapid twister of red flames and dark-blue bats made out of raw magical energy danced, following the rhythm of their mating. Janna’s eyes were blank. She was in trance, faded away into a realm which words or reason would not reach, only raw sensation. Tom forced himself to keep conscious, to reign himself in even as he wanted nothing more than to let go. He grunted and gasped, but stayed afloat, thrusting into her with wild but conscious hunger. He knew the girl below him was too fragile for him to completely lose control. Yet he edged towards brutal abandon, and towards his own climax.

Janna’s body tensed as she arrived to her own orgasm. Her walls around Tom’s cock clenched violently, causing him to burst as well, emptying into her. The troublemaker girl’s hands stretched out towards the ceiling, and lightning crackled all around the room, flowing out from the tips of each of her fingers.

They fell silent for a while, relaxing into each other’s arms. Tom’s muscles had turned from the hardness of stone to the softness of wet earth. Janna literally glowed, a soft reddish afterglow of the powers that had just flowed through her.

“See, Tom? I told you this way was better than the books,” she whispered, softly.

“And I told you, it was like trying to be a lightning rod,” Tom replied. Some measure of worry in his voice. The girl was playing Russian roulette with energies too destructive for her body to contain.

And he kept allowing it, because it helped him to let his own frustrations out, and because it distracted him from Star. Did that mean he was still the bad guy then, after all?

----

“I call the darkness unto me, from deepest depths of earth and sea, from ancient evils unawoken, to break the one who can’t be broken,” intoned Star.

It was not even the words of the spell what terrified Marco as he approached the princess, nor the dark clouds that seemed to gather around her as she spoke them. It was the cold fury in his friend’s eyes.

He had never seen Star so focused, so determined. Even when she had broken Toffee’s glass prison, seemingly so long ago, she didn’t look nearly as threatening. In front of her was a stone statue, crude in its shape and features, but clearly representing a tall faceless female form with six arms.

“To blackest night I pledge my soul, and crush my heart to burning coal, to summon forth the deathly power, to-see-my-hated-foe-devoured!”

A beam of inky purple darkness exploded out of Star’s wand, as she stammered the end of the spell as fast as she could. The crystal half-star turned pitch black as the power its owner had summoned passed through it, venomous and corrosive. The ray of death hit the center of the rough statue, right in the middle of its torso. With a horrible rumble, the form cracked and exploded, fragments of
rock flying in every direction. Marco jumped to evade one such projectile, while those headed for Star bounced away in mid air. Waves of purple magic flashed all around the princess. They looked very much like the golden waves of the magical armor that had protected Jackie in her duel with Princess White.

Star closed her eyes and lifted her left hand from the wand. She made a fist in mid air, and opened her eyes. They shone with blinding green light, a brightness that extended to the heart marks on her cheeks as well. A second later, a new statue sprouted out from the ground itself, crude but fully formed, right beside the one Star had just destroyed. Marco noticed then the many piles of rubble around the courtyard where Star stood. It was obvious she had been doing this for a while.

“Hey Star,” Marco drew attention to himself, trying the best to sound casual. Honestly, he felt more than a bit unnerved by what he had seen so far. Star never took practicing magic this seriously before and, although her powers were often destructive, there was something different about these spells. It was as if they left a charge upon the air that spoke of fury and raw violence.

The way the princess turned her sight towards him - quick like a cobra, fixing those incandescent green eyes on his own - did nothing to make the boy feel any less disturbed. He flinched. He had to remind himself that it was only Star, his best friend, his girlfriend. She would never hurt him.

“Marco?” she blinked, and her eyes went back to their normal cerulean blue. Her expression softened. She even smiled, as much as he had seen her smile since they arrived back from St. O’s at least, which was not much of a smile at all. “What are you doing back on Mewni?

“No, that’s not it,” she muttered quietly, to no one in particular, glancing at the empty space to her right. She frowned. Slowly, she turned back towards Marco and lowered her wand. “Don’t worry, I am not leaving yet. I said I’d see you before then. It’s not like I am going to forget that, Marco.”

“Well, that’s the thing, Star,” the boy spoke, walking towards her, across the piled up debris covering her improvised training grounds. “I am going with you. Or well, we are all going together. I have a lead on Hekapoo, I think she is alive, or partly alive, and she can help us find the thing that... well... the thing that...”

“Killed my mom?” Star finished the sentence calmly, a quizzical but dispassionate look directed at Marco. It was frankly more unnerving than any other reaction he could have expected. “You can say it. I do know she is dead, you know?”

It was then that Marco noticed the blackened tendrils expanding out from Star’s hands, covering the entirety of her palms and stretching as far up as the elbow. “Star, what happened to your arms?!”

“Oh, right, those,” she shrugged. “It’s just the spell, Marco. A minor side-effect.”

She inhaled and blinked. Her eyes shone green again. Slowly, the tendrils began blurring, the darkened veins vanishing back into unblemished skin. Soon, her hands and arms had recovered their rosy color. “See? Nothing to worry about. So, you were saying, Hekapoo is alive? Are you sure?”

“Ah, well, that,” Marco stammered, still off balance. “She appeared to me on a dream and told me where to go, or at least gave me a clue. I know how that sounds like, but I swear it is not just wishful thinking. It was really her!”

“Marco, I believe you,” Star smiled. “I know she can visit you in dreams. Wonder why you and Jackie don’t consider her a creep too, but I suppose that doesn’t matter much now.”
“Wait, what?” Marco looked at her best friend, both perturbed and confused. Then he thought of a couple other dreams he’d had before involving Hekapoo. In one of them, right before he started dating Star, he had dreamed of the mewman girl too. Except now he wasn’t entirely sure it had been a normal dream. He even remembered seeing that scene again, briefly, back in St Olga’s, through the All-Seeing Eye spell. In the confusion of that horror show, and the argument that followed, he had almost forgotten. “Star, that night, when I dreamed... that I was with you, and Hekapoo. Was that real? Were you there??”

The mewman blushed slightly, but did not avert her gaze from Marco, nor did she apologize. She simply nodded. “... yeah.”

Marco had literally no response to that admission.

“So, where are we going?” Star eventually changed the subject. Marco finally figured out what was creeping him out. It wasn’t that Star seemed scary, or angry. It was that she seemed muted somehow, distant, uncharacteristically devoid of emotion. “And why is it that you are helping me, Marco? I thought you didn’t approve of revenge.”

“Star, we are all going to hell!” he shouted, angrily, trying to elicit at least some sort of reaction. She smiled lazily back at him, awaiting any further explanation. Not that it was too surprising that she was unimpressed about that, after all, given her ex. “Tom is arranging a way to get to Hekapoo’s old place as we speak, seems like our best bet so far. Apparently it is a bit outside of where he can take us himself, though, so it might not be that easy to get there.”

“I see,” Star muttered. “Is that all?”

“No, Star, that’s not all!” Marco shouted, advancing towards her, trying to grab her arm. For a second, he made contact with the hardened air, as a flash of purple waves stood between his fingers and the princess’ skin. She glanced at him with detached curiosity. Eventually, she nodded and the barrier fell, allowing him to grasp her. “Seriously Star, you are scaring me out of my mind right now! I thought seeing you mad the other day was bad, but this is way worse. You seem cold, your arm feels cold. Like, ice cold, seriously! No matter what color you make it be. Look, I know your mom just died, I know you are partly in shock. So please, talk to me! If there is anything I can do, any way I can be there for you...”

“Marco,” Star stopped him, putting a finger to his lips. “That’s why I don’t want you coming with me. I know you don’t want to see this. I didn’t want you to see this. But it is what I need to do. To avenge my mom, and to be alright. I will be back, I promise, from the thing I promised to do, and from all of this as well. But right now, I need this, I need to master it, I need the power. So many things I didn’t learn before. So many tools I might need, that my mom didn’t have, that Hekapoo didn’t have. All knowledge is good knowledge, I think. I know how this looks, but I am not going to be the ‘dark queen ascending’, Marco, I promise. I’ll stop before that point.”

Marco nodded sadly. Then he leaped to hug Star. She tensed for an instant, as if ready to strike back at the contact, and then she let herself be embraced. For a long time neither of them said anything, they just held one another amid the ruins of so many consumed statues.

“Star, I am going with you, we are going with you,” Marco finally spoke. “You are right, I don’t like seeing you like this. But I think I would like even less to sit back on Earth while you do this, just wondering what is going on with you. I’ll be there to be your boyfriend, to be your best friend, Star, no matter what. And if you do go dark, just know that you are taking me with you as well. Jackie too, apparently. It is not what I would prefer, so please keep that in mind, Star, but if you go dark, we are going dark together!”
The princess hugged him back. Her breath suddenly erratic. She was sobbing, and yet she smiled.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter and the next were originally going to be a single one but split due to length. It might be a bit more of a slow going than the past three in terms of "wham!" moments, but I think it was due time we checked up on everyone for a bit, before this all goes to hell, literally.

Coming up next: Chapter 21: Sam, I Am (For real this time!)
Chapter 20: Sam, I Am

They had gotten barely an hour of rest after their literally electrifying fuck session. Tom had insisted that they shower and dress up before the call. Somehow, the demon prince had gotten hold of the dark green dress Janna wore to their first date, and had demanded she put it on. On her head, he had placed again the live spider broach. The fledgling witch magically petrified the vermin this time around. It was partly for her own safety, but mostly just to show the demon prince that she could. Tom himself wore an impeccable white suit, that the girl had come to associate with those occasions in which he sought to truly impress.

Janna had thought about a lot of things as she bathed in the steaming hot waters of Tom’s shower. Fortunately, it wasn’t lava, although it felt like it might as well be. The demon prince’s shower had essentially two settings: hot and boiling. Then again, the human girl was almost used to it by now.

She had thought about their recent encounter, of course. About the pain, and the pleasure, and the overwhelming sensation of power as she dug deep into Tom’s energies. ’Unlimited powaaah!’ she thought with a chuckle, examining the burned tips of her fingers.

Was it really true that she got more power out of banging Tom that she got by studying and practicing known spells? Or was it the other way around? That the more proficient she got at her craft otherwise, the more she could draw forth from the demon during their union? After all, they had had sex before she started learning magic, and nothing like this had ever happened back then.

She had thought about Star too. About how the mewman princess irritated her so. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong with that, with her own instincts regarding Star. She was, after all, or used to be, her friend. But, at the same time, she couldn’t control how much it irked her whenever Tom talked about his ex. It always had bothered her somewhat. But it was so much worse now, after that night back in St Olga’s, after she had waited alone for Tom to comfort the princess.

Janna couldn’t for the life of her say what was it that made that night so significant. Was it that Star and Tom had gotten back to being in good terms as friends? It didn’t seem like a big enough deal. Yet, somehow, it was. Alone in the woods, she had let her jealousy towards Star blossom into bitter resentment, and now she couldn’t shake it off, no matter how much she tried. And there was also the strange sensation of having forgotten something about that night, something important.

Finally, she thought about this mystery person that made Tom so nervous. ’An old friend of the family’ is all the boy had said about the other demon. But it was obvious from his reactions that
the demon prince was terrified of this guy, and it wasn’t really clear why. The more nervous Tom got, the more eager Janna was to meet this ‘Sam’. And now, she was about to. She had asked and begged Tom to let her be present. Finally, she had threatened to barge in either way. At that point, he had relented, admonishing her to try to be silent unless asked to speak, to be on her best behavior.

“Or as close to good behavior as it’s possible in your case,” had said the boy, with a groan. It was so weird how similar him and Marco were sometimes, not that either would welcome the comparison.

Tom Lucitor, prince of hell, knelt before his own mirror, and motioned Janna to do the same. Puzzled, she acquiesced. Who the literal hell was this guy that Tom felt the need to bow down to like this?

“Mirror,” Tom took a deep breath, “call Sam.”

“CALLING...”

A billowing wind, the crackle of distant thunder, and the mirror went dark. The many flames of Tom’s room faded out into nothingness all of a sudden. Their only source of light was now the red glow of the cascade of molten magma that served as the demon’s decorative fountain. Black spots began appearing on the mirror, until they covered its entire surface. When the glass had darkened in its entirety, a swirling maelstrom of ghostly cerulean light began reflecting upon the opal surface. A cacophony of cries and lamentations filled the air, and underneath that, Janna thought she could hear a chorus of voices chanting in an ancient tongue. As the pale teal currents became clearer and clearer, the human girl was able to see that they were formed by a mass of phantasmal human faces, all grimacing in agony.

The mirror zoomed in deeper and deeper into the haunted void, until it came to show a naked young man. Most of his features, and his nude form, were hidden from her sight by the mass of what had to be rivers upon rivers of human souls (Or were they mewman? Something else entirely?). What bits of skin she could see were white. Not white as in caucasian. White like a marble statue, and beautiful in exactly the same inhuman way. His hair was golden and shone with a brightness that would have put the sun to shame. His eyes glowed with a blue light so intense, it was literally impossible to meet his gaze.

“Who dares summon the Final Cold, the Endless Shadow, the Sword Aflame Inevitable?” boomed the unearthly creature’s voice, words that echoed like huge brass bells. He glanced at Janna, and she felt a presence so powerful, a well of magic so deep, even through the mirror, that it made Tom’s energies seem like a roadside puddle by comparison. The blue eyes fixed themselves on the Prince Lucitor and then... their blinding light went out. Two far more human eyes replaced them, albeit still ones of an unusual azure intensity. “Tom? Tom Lucitor?!”

Sam snapped his fingers and the flames in Tom’s room returned, the image inside the mirror dissolved in a blink. A rather preppy college dorm room replaced the sea of screaming faces. The boy sitting there on a messy twin bed was dressed in simple brown khaki shorts and a pink polo shirt. His face was still inhumanly beautiful and the tone of marble, but it now wore a very human smile. “Tom! Long time no see, bro! You looking good! Hit the gym recently?”

“Oh, something like that,” Tom blushed and ran a hand through the back of his neck.

The blond boy looked at Janna, then back at the purple demon prince, clearly drawing his own conclusions as to Tom’s exercise routine. “Ah, I see. Niiice. High five, brah!”
Incredibly, he actually held his palm up, on the other side of the mirror. The boy waited then, stupidly, for the second part of a gesture that definitely didn’t work at a distance. Janna felt confused, just as much as she felt disappointed.

“Sam, with all due respect, is this charade necessary?” Tom asked, timidly.

A piercing glare of fulminating blue light fixed upon the heir to the Lucitor crown. It went away again as soon as it had come, and the other boy’s eyes went back to normal. Or perhaps, the blinding light was normal, and the human-looking orbs an illusion.

“It is all a charade either way, Tom,” Sam shrugged. “It is always a charade, and then oblivion. Might as well be pleasant to my favorite Lucitor! Besides, you have no idea just how old the whole ‘Sword Aflame’ bit gets after the first few eons... Speaking of which, what are you two doing on the floor?! Stand up, come on! We are all friends!”

The boy kept motioning up with his hand until both Tom and the human girl had gotten back on their feet.

He smiled at Janna, “Hey, I am Sam, by the way, Tom’s old bud, nice to meet you!”

“Janna,” she replied, still feeling off balance at the sudden shift in tone from the boy. Damn, that was usually her job. Feeling like she had to at least try to surprise the stranger, she added, “So are you the devil? Because that’d be cool.”

Tom glared at her. Sam laughed raucously.

“Oh man! The devil? THE? No way! A devil, sure. Or, well, something like that,” he replied, making a dismissive gesture with his hand that was perhaps meant to signal humbleness, but was way too obvious to be sincere. Or perhaps, it was calculatedly insincere. “THE devil, though? Nah, J-Flame, I am not The Morning Star...”

The apprentice witch felt herself relax just a bit. In a way, it was probably good news that they weren’t having a chat with Lucifer himself. Even if a part of her had wished that had been the case.

“I mean, I know the guy. A truly inspiring bro. Really doesn’t know when to fold them, and takes it all way too seriously, but fuck me if he is not the best motivational speaker I’ve ever known! He makes you want to follow him into, well,” he looked around and shrugged.

Janna once again felt unsteady. Just who the godforsaken here was this guy? He sounded like an idiot half of the time. But it was obvious he was being an idiot on purpose, and laughing at them all the way! And he spoke of the Dark Prince of Hell the way Marco spoke of goddamn Justin Towers!

“But enough small talk,” added Sam. He sighed. “Tom, I know you. You never call unless you need something. So what is it this time, bro? What do I need to bail you out on? Let’s just hear it.”

“Sorry, Sam. I’d like to call you more often, of course, but, well, I just know how busy you always are, didn’t want to trouble you just to chat...” the demon prince apologized. Even Janna knew that was a lame excuse. The boy in the polo shirt actually rolled his eyes at it. Tom relented, realizing his attempts to butter up the other demon were worse than pointless, “Ugh. Fine, fine. Sam, I humbly request your permission to cross through the city of Dis, and through the hells within your domain...”

“Tom, you are my bro! My pal! My amigo! Your family and I go way back, like way-way back. You don’t even need to ask!” Sam replied effusively. “You are free to walk my neighborhood any
time you want, man. I wish you would come and visit me, but it’s not like you have to do that either if you are not up for it, bro. Seriously, no problem!

“... and I would like to take some people with me.” Tom added, tentatively.

Sam looked pensive for a moment, his smile gone. Then he looked at Janna, and brightened up once again. “Your chick? Sure. For you, I can do that. Only the one, right?”

“Four more besides myself,” the demon prince clarified. “And I need your word that they will get safe passage. All of them.”

Sam whistled. Then he frowned. He seemed to mull it over, or at least made a show of pretending to do so. “That doesn’t sound much fun on my end, bro. How about two out of four? You bring the four, I let you and two others out alive, my choice! How does that sound?”

It was surreal to get a counter-offer like that from a guy dressed like he was recruiting people to pledge to an Ivy League frat. Janna couldn’t avoid being a little bit freaked out as she realized, from Tom’s disturbed expression, that the suggestion was probably a serious one.

“Sam, no, they all need to get through unharmed,” Tom continued, only slightly shaken. “This is sort of important. I wouldn’t ask otherwise. Maybe there is another way? Something I can offer? Another favor I can owe you?”

“Bro, you owe me way too many favors as it is,” the other demon lifted both his palms up. “You are asking me to let four mortals through Dis, alive. It goes against everything Dis is supposed to be about. Against everything I am supposed to be about. It’s like, my thing, bro! Sorry, can’t do. No deal.”

Sam paused for a moment. He and Tom exchanged glances, three eyes on two. But it was obvious who had the final word, and by a wide margin.

“I can give you one other option,” the alabaster devil finally spoke, with a grin. She pointed at Janna. “How about this? The chick’s soul upfront, you and three mortals of your choice go through, no other conditions. Sweet, right?”

Tom balked at that, looking truly horrified, which pleased the human girl more than she let on. But before he could say anything, Janna interjected.

“My soul is not Tom’s to give,” she noted. “But I guess I could give you a good deal on it, myself. Nothing upfront, though. The five of us go through, and you still need to sweeten the deal for me personally. Then I pay up say, a century from now? No time at all from your perspective, right? What do you say? Worth chatting about?”

“Janna!” Tom yelled at her, his eyes glowing red. “I told you to be quiet! That’s not a deal you want to make.”

“Janna!” Tom shouted. “She has no idea what she is doing!”

“That’s what he said!” Sam responded, laughing at his own joke. “But don’t worry, bro. I swear I won’t seduce your chick. Not carnally, at least! I mean, you know I don’t swing that way!”
“Please, Sam, there must be something I can offer you instead!” Tom begged.

Sam looked at Tom, his eyes lingering up and down over the demon prince’s body. Eyes suddenly slitted, like those of a snake. He licked his lips. “No, Tom, there really isn’t. Not even that.” His tone carried a coldness now that belied everything about the dumb jock he had been playing up to that point.

“I’ll give you that, Sam... gladly,” the Prince Lucitor continued. Janna wasn’t sure if they were talking about what she thought they were talking, but she let her imagination run wild. “For safe passage for me and just one other!”

“The mewman princess, you mean? Don’t you need the boy warrior too, at least, to find your way once on the other side?” Sam retorted.

Wait, he knew about Star? And Marco? Janna was yanked out of her fantasy and into the grips of shock. So the other boy knew exactly what this was all about, from the beginning. He had been playing them the entire time, that much was obvious even before this point. But only now was Janna beginning to realize to what extent he was toying with them. How had he put it? ‘It is always a charade’?

“I am afraid that wouldn’t work either, anyways. Although I did want you to at least make me that offer, Tom. Nice to know there is a price for that.” The blond devil shrugged. “No. I think I like my idea better, I’ll negotiate with Miss Ordonia here instead. For what it is worth, I’ll give her my fairest deal.”

“No! Forget it,” Tom bellowed. “I won’t allow that! By right of domain, she is in my lands, under my protection, and...”

Sam smirked at that. It was as if he had just heard an old joke. “I am afraid, it is not up to you... ‘bro’.”

That instant, the entire world around Janna went dark.

----

It was like something out of an old movie: the dim lit bar, the stench of tobacco, the faceless patrons swinging around in the tiny dance floor. Janna sat on a small circular table for two, and on the other side, Sam grinned at her, dressed in a pinstripe suit and wearing a matching trilby hat. In the background, out of literally nowhere, floated the tunes of Elvis Presley’s “Devil in Disguise”. That, Janna thought, was a bit on the nose.

‘Ok, Janna Ordonia, you are having a deal with the devil type situation; you basically prepared your entire life for this moment, you got this,’ she reminded herself. Sam made a gesture with his hand and two sets of glasses appeared in front of them, already filled.

“Old Fashioned?” he asked. “Seems appropriate. But of course, I can change it...” He looked around. “All of it.”

“Sorry, I am not drinking,” replied Janna. That was a lesson from her first date with Tom she would not soon forget.

“As you wish,” shrugged the devil. “But tell me Janna, I am curious. How is ol’ Tommy Boy in the sack?”

Wait. What?! Janna had to hold herself from doing a double take again. It wasn’t just the question
itself, it was the tone with which Sam had asked. He wasn’t mocking her, at least not blatantly. He
wasn’t just making strangely personal small talk either. He seemed genuinely curious,
conspiratorial even; a twinkle of excitement in his eyes. That’s not how she expected this
conversation to go at all. Was it perhaps a negotiating tactic? Something to keep her off balance?

“What is it to you?” she retorted. Then, unable to contain her own curiosity, “Do you actually like
Tom? Men, in general?”

‘Right, Janna, real fucking smooth, ask the devil if he is gay, why don’t you? There is a brilliant
negotiating tactic!’ she reproached herself.

“Why yes, of course. I am what you might call...” he looked at his drink, took a sip and shrugged
again, “... old fashioned. Your kind only came around a bit after my time, my dearest daughter of
Eve.”

Her kind? Daughter of Eve? Did he mean women? Like, in general? That had to be some bullshit!
Janna frowned. “So, is that whole biblical stuff for real, or are you doing it for show?”

“Both,” Sam smiled, clearly enjoying her confusion. He gestured all around them, “It is all a show,
after all. Props and actors in a comedy play with only one possible punchline. But I do try to go for
things that would be familiar to you, and it is the truth that my kind predates that particular
distinction.”

Intriguing as the implications of that admission might be, that wasn’t getting her anywhere. “Ok, so
you like Tom, and you are annoyed at him for not calling you more often, and that’s why you want
my soul or to kill two of his friends?”

When you put it like that, it was monumentally petty!

“Ah, miss Ordonia, I knew you were perceptive,” Sam retorted, seemingly delighted. “That’s some
of it. I do like making Tommy squirm, and he did snub my latest party invitation, and a dozen or so
before that. But I do also really loathe to let people through Dis unscathed. It is terrible for my
image, you see?”

His image? What image? This guy changed faces and tone like Brittney changed clothes! Then it
hit Janna. There was a third motive, one that was obvious after you had seen all this performance,
all the tricks and charades. ’It is always a charade, and then oblivion’. Sam talked murder and soul
bartering in the same breath as sex, drinks and even polite pleasantries, and that was the one part
that wasn’t an act. He genuinely didn’t care. Didn’t rank one of those as more sacred or more foul
than the others. At least, Janna hoped that was true.

“I don’t know if that’s a lie, about your image, but I don’t buy that’s the real reason either,” Janna
insisted. “You don’t care about my soul, or about Tom sleeping with you, or about the lives of my
friends, and I don’t think you care about your reputation. You are doing all of this just to amuse
yourself! Because you are bored!”

Of course, from Janna’s perspective, her soul or her life were expensive prices to pay. So if she
negotiated from her point of view only, she would have to pay an astronomically high cost to offer
Sam something of equivalent importance. But if her interlocutor was valuing them for
entertainment, then all she had to do is to offer something more entertaining, rather than something
more valuable!

If she expected hers to be a piercing read, however, she was sorely disappointed. Sam merely
laughed and clapped his hands twice.
“Bingo! Now you are getting somewhere! Yes, I have more souls than I know what to do with and, after you have killed a few trillion mortals, there is very little variety in that business as well. And I’d bet you the apples of paradise themselves that teasing Tom gives me more pleasure in the end than having him be mine ever would,” he chuckled. “What can I say? I am just trying to get a little bit of fun back into an unbearably tedious and near-interminable existence, just like you say. Some humor back into the dull long play. ’Life’s a laugh and death’s a joke,’ as you kids say.”

Smiling at that confession, Janna sat back for a moment, thinking carefully of what she could offer that might amuse the ancient demon. Her interlocutor seemed not the least bit impatient as she silently pondered her options.

“Fine,” she finally spoke. “I have an idea. How about you invite all five of us to that party you were talking about? I’ll get Tom to go, for your teasing pleasure. And how often you have living mortals there? It should amuse you more than killing two more people would, I’d think, and your reputation should not be in the line if we are there for your entertainment. The one condition is that we get to cross to where we are going afterwards, and to return the same way, and no harm shall come to any of us from it.”

“But what if you guys abuse that last clause to spoil my party? Or, with all due disrespect, Janna, to rob me blind?” Sam objected. He was completely calm. At the same time, he hadn’t needed an instant to think his objections. He had spoken the moment she had finished her offer. Either he was an unbelievably fast thinker, he could read her mind, or else this was the direction in which the conversation was always supposed to go. Any of those was a possibility with this guy, really. “If I offer you my blanket protection, I would be inviting into my home people who I am powerless to defend against.”

Janna was sure that much was a lie. Not harming them and being unable to stop them were two different things. Another charade, then? Either way, it was a cue for her to sweeten the deal, or to address the concern, genuine or not, and see where that led her.

“Then promise no harm shall come to any of us, as long as we don’t try to harm you, rob you, or ruin your party,” Janna amended. A conditional protection, rather than a blanket one. If the demon had meant it only as a bartering prod, then he would need to prod again.

“But what if you guys abuse that last clause to spoil my party? Or, with all due disrespect, Janna, to rob me blind?” Sam objected. He was completely calm. At the same time, he hadn’t needed an instant to think his objections. He had spoken the moment she had finished her offer. Either he was an unbelievably fast thinker, he could read her mind, or else this was the direction in which the conversation was always supposed to go. Any of those was a possibility with this guy, really. “If I offer you my blanket protection, I would be inviting into my home people who I am powerless to defend against.”

Janna was sure that much was a lie. Not harming them and being unable to stop them were two different things. Another charade, then? Either way, it was a cue for her to sweeten the deal, or to address the concern, genuine or not, and see where that led her.

“Then promise no harm shall come to any of us, as long as we don’t try to harm you, rob you, or ruin your party,” Janna amended. A conditional protection, rather than a blanket one. If the demon had meant it only as a bartering prod, then he would need to prod again.

“Now, that’s an idea,” the suited boy smirked at Janna in enthusiastic agreement, and she knew then that the conversation was still following his plan, not hers. “All five of you shall come to my party, this coming weekend. You will stay the night before and the night after, three days in total, and I shall treat you all like my honored guests. No harm shall befall you while you are in my domain, so long as you adhere to all rules of hospitality towards myself and mine. Afterwards you will be allowed safe passage back through my lands, should you truly need it. Do we have a deal?”

He extended his hand.

Janna left him waiting as she pondered the implications. It was not like it was her idea, although it felt like it had been. It was not like she was in control, although Sam had gotten out of his way to make her believe so. But, in the end, it really was probably the fairest deal she was ever going to get from him. Despite the feeling that she ought not to, Janna shook the devil’s hand.

----

“Don’t ’bro’ me!” Tom yelled. “I said you are bargaining with me or not at all, Sam!”

The boy in the mirror, wearing the pink polo shirt and khaki shorts, just looked back amused. Janna looked down at her hands, and at the stack of four black envelopes she was now holding. Tom
looked at her with terrified surprise.

“Janna! What did you just do?! When?” Tom glared back at Sam accusingly. “You stopped time! Messed with reality in my domain!”

“Ah, what’s a little liberty like that between bros, Tom?” the other boy chuckled. “Besides, I gave her my fairest deal, man, just like I said I would.”

“Your fairest? Your fairest?!! The plague is your fairest!!” the Prince Lucitor unleashed, fire flowing all around them. Sam let him be, seeming rather unimpressed.

“Actually, Tom,” Janna interrupted. “I think we are all invited to the Frat Party from Hell, and if we go and behave, then we all get to cross through.”

“If?” Tom glared at Janna, eyes glowing red. “You made a deal with Sam that has the word ‘if’ in it?!”

“Ahem,” the blond boy in the mirror coughed. “I don’t want to interrupt the marital dispute, people. But I have stuff to get back too. People to deceive, worlds to destroy. You know, the usual. See you all there this weekend. I promise it’ll be a blast! By the way, Janna, you are wrong; it won’t be just any old rager, actually, but a masquerade ball! The details are on the invites. No worries, the costumes are on me. Just, keep in mind that not wearing them, or not playing along, would be real uncool.”

‘This too, is my sacred rule of hospitality, and you shall not dare violate it’ he might as well have said. Janna frowned. Tom was right. She was an idiot. She had just agreed to a game for which she did not know the rules.

There was an explosion of blue flames on the other end, some of which flew out into Tom’s room through the mirror, and then the call dropped. Tom walked towards his couch and sank into it, deflated.

“Well, I suppose that could have possibly gone even worse.”

----

The five teens had chosen to meet at Marco’s place that same night. Jackie had skated there from her own place. Star and Marco had taken Tom’s carriage back from Mewni. The demon prince himself had instead used the gargoyle-powered lift, and brought Janna along. It was the best possible logistics without a working pair of dimensional scissors, assuming they were all in. Hell, they probably where all in now, no matter what, because of the stupid deal Janna had made, Marco thought.

“Ok, let me see if I understand this,” spoke the boy, exasperated. “We can cross through the lands of this Sam person, but only if we spend three days at his place, and go to his weird costume party. And if any of us is not on their best behavior...”

He made a point of glaring at Janna, who was making a point of her own of ignoring him in return. Instead, she appeared to busy herself playing with the four black envelopes in her hands.

“... if any of us makes a faux pas, and we don’t exactly know for sure what is or isn’t a faux pas, then he is free to kill us,” the human boy continued. Tom nodded in grim agreement. “That is, assuming he even respects the deal in the first place!”

“He will, Marco,” Tom assured him. “Sam is many things, but I have never known him to break a
promise. That sort of thing is a big no-no in the underworld, actually. Misleading and lying is all fair game, but vow-breaking is, well, almost unthinkable under these circumstances. That’s not the problem. The question is whether it’s even possible for us to keep our end of the bargain.”

“I don’t see why it wouldn’t be,” Jackie argued. “Don’t break things, don’t steal, wear the costumes, play along. Sounds easy enough to me!”

Marco knew Jackie well enough to realize that she liked the idea of dressing up in costume again. He knew better than anyone else that she had very much enjoyed doing so in St O’s. So, for her, the opportunity of disguising herself again was a boon rather than an obstacle. He tried to meet her eyes for a conspiratorial glance, but she was not looking his way.

The skateboarder girl had not said anything of the sort, but he could tell she was not entirely thrilled with him after their last conversation. It was not like they were fighting or anything. But, obviously, Jackie hadn’t loved that he tried to break up with her, even for ostensibly selfless reasons. Marco realized he owed the girl an apology.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s true,” spoke Star absentmindedly, scratching her left arm. She was lying on the floor, staring at the ceiling without looking at any of them. It didn’t sound like she was agreeing with Jackie, but rather responding to someone else, someone only she could see. She sat up all of a sudden. “No, Jackie, you are wrong. It will be hard to do. He would not have offered that deal if it was going to be easy to comply for us. It is a game for him, after all, and you don’t make a game without a challenge.”

“Well, Star,” spoke Janna crossly. “He is bored, nothing wrong with that! It is a better deal than any of the ones he was willing to offer Tom!”

“Right, right, bored,” Star rolled her eyes. “Excellent excuse. Will be sure to remember it the next time I feel like killing two out of five of your friends because I want to be amused, Janna.”

It was obviously sarcasm, but something in the tone Star said that still gave Marco the chills. Janna glared at the princess and the mewman glared right back.

“Anyways,” Tom interrupted, pushing himself forward to sit in between the two girls, blocking their line of sight to one another. “That theory about Sam being bored? I don’t buy it. Not that anything Star said about this being a game, and thus a challenge, is wrong. But Sam doesn’t do things on a whim, not really, there is always a reason. I bet his boredom is just another charade.”

“Does it matter, Tom?” Janna spat. “I got us the only deal that does not involve any guaranteed deaths. You think you could have done better?”

Janna and Tom bickered some more, but Marco wasn’t listening. He kept his eyes on Star, who was looking towards his window and nodding. Suddenly, she turned around to glare at him. It was weird how glaring was something Star just sorta did now, routinely. It seemed like her sight had two modes: spaced out or burning intensity. “Marco, assuming we do this. Then what? What are we looking for on the other side?”

“I told you, Star,” he answered nervously. “We are looking for Hekapoo. She is out best lead to find whomever… uh… whatever killed your mom.”

“Marco, Hekapoo is dead,” Star observed. It was not a question. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that everyone was looking at him now.

“I... I don’t think so, Star,” Marco tried to argue. “Or, if she is, not all of her is dead. She told me to
look for her, in the dream!”

Janna coughed. But everyone else seemed to be taking the boy at his word. Star shifted her eyes back to the window, before looking towards Marco again.

“Are you sure about that?” she asked. Marco nodded.

“Well,” Jackie interrupted finally. “I think we should all vote on whether or not we are doing this.”

Marco nodded, and so did Tom and Star. Janna crossed her arms.

“Pretty sure you all know what is my vote,” said Janna.

“I vote yes too,” spoke Jackie.

“Yes,” followed Marco.

“Fine,” grumbled Tom.

They all looked at Star, expectantly.

----

Star pondered the situation for a moment. It was as good as any lead she currently had, given how much Glossaryck was not being forthcoming about the creature that killed her mom. She looked up at the ceiling, at the floating little man. A translucent ghost, blue and green, the color of seaweed. He stared blankly at her, with infuriating indifference.

Star knew none of her friends could see him, and knew that she shouldn’t tell them about the ghosts, either of them. They wouldn’t understand. They would think she was crazy. Janna might have believed her, if she wasn’t so angry at her all the time now. Marco would balk, taking it as another sign of her slowly going evil, or mad, and, frankly, Star didn’t have the patience to deal with that conversation a third time. Jackie? Well, things with Jackie were super awkward now a days, and what did the girl even know of ghosts?

Maybe she ought to tell Tom? She wouldn’t have considered it even a week before. But the last few days Tom had been on a surprisingly excellent behavior, and he knew more about ghosts and dead people than anyone else she knew. Besides, he was the only one who didn’t get so damn freaked out with her now. He was the only one who didn’t think she was going dark. Or, at least, the only one who didn’t care.

She became aware of the expectant stares of all her friends. They had all come together to help her, and now they were just waiting for her to approve their plan. It was a nice thoughtful plan too, except that...

She glanced again at the windowsill. Hekapoo’s ghostly form smiled at her apologetically, sitting there with a leg crossed over the other. “You won’t find me all the way there, you know? I am afraid this is all that’s left of me, kid.”

Star shook her head. She didn’t know who to believe. There was something off about Glossaryck and Hekapoo. Something off since they started showing up around her. Something other than their obvious ghostliness.

The little magic man first came to her right after her chat with Eclipsa, while the sorceress showed up right after Marco first told her he had dreamed of her. Neither had said anything helpful about
the thing that killed them. Instead, the tiny magic man had offered only reproaches and admonitions to Star, mostly about her recent forays into the dark arts. The sorceress, for her part, seemed mostly concerned with reminding Star that she was dead, and her mom too, and urging the princess to move on. Every time that it looked like there was a path to avenge her mother, another phantom appeared to tell Star how that could not possibly work, how her friends were all wrong, how she was wrong. She was beginning to hate the ghosts.

“Yeah, Marco,” she voted. “I am in.”

It was still her best lead, by default, even if it was completely wrong. Besides, maybe she could ask this ’Sam’ about her mom’s killer. Force him to tell her what he knew, if need be.

Hekapoo shrugged and shook her head.

----

“Oookay,” Jackie said, after Star finally deigned to give her two cents. “Then the second step is to look at the invitations. Right?”

“Already done,” Tom said, holding up his own envelope, the only one addressed to one of them in particular, the one he apparently got weeks ago, around the time of Star’s Song Day. “There is not much in here, actually. Time: this Saturday night, which means we need to be there Friday night as per Janna’s already famous deal. Fortunately, we can take the carriage for most of that journey, so departing early that same day will suffice. Place: Sam’s palace inside the city of Dis. Costume mandatory at all times. Oh, and this...”

He passed them a black card with silver lettering. It had only two words in it: ‘The Scoundrel’.

Jackie got it immediately, “That’s the role you are going to play, right? Your masquerade costume?”

Tom nodded.

“How about the other four? How do we distribute those,” asked Marco.

“I guess we just pick the closed envelope at random,” shrugged Jackie. Seemed like the only fair way. “Then we keep whatever we got, unless someone wants to trade.”

“Sounds good to me,” Janna agreed, taking an envelope from the pile and passing the rest to Marco. She broke the seal. The cry of what must have been a tormented soul filled the air as she did. Even after all she had been through recently, vampires and all, Jackie couldn’t help but to shudder a bit at the shrill agonizing wail. But the troublemaker girl paid it no mind. She grinned as she picked up her card and showed it to everyone: ‘The Witch’

Marco took his envelope and passed the other two to Star first, walking all the way to where she was sitting, rather than handing them to the human girl directly to his side. Jackie noticed that, and it bothered her more than it probably should have. Another hellish cry and Marco was holding a card saying ‘The Champion’.

Star took an envelope absentmindedly, put a finger through the wax, and the seal melted on its own. Jackie swore she could see a flash of green where Star finger had made contact with the flaming-sword sigil. There was no cry.

“’The Countess’?” the mewman spoke with only mild disappointment. She looked up at the ceiling again, silent for a second. She shrugged, “Yeah, that’s right, seems like a step down, but whatever,
Finally, Star noticed she still had the final closed envelope in her hands. She lifted a finger and the envelope floated all the way to where Jackie was sitting. The skateboarder girl took the envelope in her hands. She tried ripping apart the top first, but the material wouldn’t tear. Reluctantly, she broke the much more fragile wax seal, and another damned soul cried as she did.

She took the small black card from the inside, looked at the silvery letters, and her expression fell. It read, in big bold script: ‘The Slave’. She showed the others the card with some hesitation.

The Slave? They had all gotten some awesome role to play, and that was what she got? Jackie felt disappointed. Hell, she felt downright insulted! Janna had gotten ‘witch’, Star had gotten a nobility title, and Marco had gotten something related to physical combat. There was no way those were all coincidences. Which meant the envelopes somehow predicted, or influenced, who chose which one. Which meant in turn that the damn card was either mocking her, or worse, judging her, disparaging her worth. It might as well have read ‘The Second Fiddle’, ‘The Spare’.

“Eh, Jackie,” Marco finally spoke. “We can switch if you want...”

Ok, he got brownie points for that one at least! But no, she had set the rules, and it was clear Marco didn’t want her card either, so it wasn’t really a valid swap. Besides, if she was right, then the role had somehow chosen her. Irritating as that idea was, it was probably better to play along. “Nah, dude, it’s ok. You be the champion this time around. It’s only fair.”

They talked some more about the next steps, and agreed to meet at Tom’s the morning after tomorrow’s to start their journey, aiming to arrive at the gates of Dis by Friday night. It meant that they had one more day to pack and say their goodbyes, and two more nights home. At least, Marco and her did.

Janna and Tom would instead take the elevator back to the demon prince’s castle that same night, while Star had decided to stay on Earth, rather than go back to Mewni for a single day. Ostensibly, her going back and forth would just complicate things and undermine the transition into River’s regency. But Jackie suspected the real reason was that the princess really couldn’t stand being in Mewni any more. Meanwhile, Marco was supposed to keep Tom’s carriage on Earth, so that the three of them could more easily travel between dimensions if absolutely needed.

All through their planning, Jackie paid little attention, her mind set on the card, and its implications.

----

It felt strange, to be back in her room; her Earth room. Star had only been living back in Mewni for little over a week, preparing her mom’s wake at first, then setting everything up to delegate the functions of government back to King River, and finally, studying Eclipsa’s notes, preparing for the battle ahead. It felt like so much longer than a week.

Now she was ready to leave Mewni for a long while, and Earth too, to fulfill the promise she had made in front of her people, the pact she had made with Eclipsa. She scratched her left hand. Then, realizing she was alone, she closed her eyes and dipped down, undoing the silly glamour that concealed the black tendrils of the killing spell, revealing back her permanently burned veins. It was such a relief to be rid of the illusion, to stop spending her magic and her focus on the color of her arms, to get rid of the itching sensation of having the corruption simmer beneath her skin, unseen. She hid that only for Marco’s benefit, really, and the boy was not with her tonight.
She had come up alone to her room after their little planning session, leaving Marco to say goodbye to Jackie. The girl had seemed pretty crestfallen after she read her card, and Star figured she might want to talk to her boyfriend about it. That left Tom… and Janna. The princess would rather avoid any more awkward interactions with the troublemaker girl at this point, if she could, so she had decided to excuse herself instead. Besides, let’s face it, she was avoiding awkward interactions with Marco too, and he might well be doing the same with her.

The boy had been uncomfortable around her ever since her mom died, and particularly of late, for understandable, but still frustrating, reasons. In fact, Star and Marco hadn’t so much as kissed since St Olga’s. Jackie and Marco hadn’t had sex in that time either, the princess knew, although they had certainly been closer to it than she and Marco had. She could sense every time they started making out, just as well as when they stopped themselves short. She was trying to stop herself from feeling the link, but it was in vain. It was like trying to ignore the itching of her arms. She could pretend not to feel it, but she could not actually ignore the sensation.

Telling them that she knew of their troubles would only make it harder for them to feel comfortable again, however, and so Star didn’t mention it. And Jackie didn’t mention it to Star that she was still mad at her, because she thought that the princess had enough things to worry about. Which was, she noted, rather true. The problem was that, like the itching, the fact that none of them talked about why things were awkward all around didn’t exactly stop them from being awkward.

Besides, there was a lot of stuff going through Star’s head these days: the burning rage, the suffocating emptiness, the nightmares, the ghosts, the ambivalent sensations of revulsion and pleasure she felt when casting the spells in Eclipsa’s little book of dark magic. All of those things made it even harder for her to open up to her friends like before.

Yet, despite her own withdrawal, and the ways in which she had hurt them already, they had not abandoned her. If anything, they were even more determined to help her than ever. Marco hated the idea of her revenge mission, and yet had gone out of his way to find her a lead, however flimsy it might be. Tom had moved all his contacts, and he seemed to have Star’s back unconditionally, in a way he never did back when they were dating. Janna seemed to hate Star now a days, and yet she was the one who had brokered a deal with this Sam person. They all, and Jackie too, were risking their lives in pursuit of Star’s self-imposed quest.

“Yes, Star,” spoke a familiar voice behind her, loving and compassionate, yet stern as well. “They are all willing to follow you, but that means you need to be wise in how you lead. The same goes for the people of Mewni, and even River. There are so many people who are trying to help you now. Is it really worth it putting them all in harm’s way?”

Star’s eyes welled up with tears as she turned around, to see the one ghost that had not turned up before. The one who completed the pattern that had begun with Glossaryck and continued with Hekapoo. The one she wanted to see more than anything in all the worlds. And, sure enough, there she was, regally attired, translucently green, and so very very sad, “M... Mom?”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Star sees dead people! Because she wasn't creepy enough last chapter!

Which leads us to...

Coming up next: Chapter 22: Thicker than Water.
To Shock_Cooling: I did a double take when I saw your own "Hi, sweetie" scene in Shadows. Believe it or not, this chapter was 100% written (but not edited), before I saw that. I am writing these words together with my comment to the corresponding chapter of your fic, even though you won't see this for a few weeks. Here is hoping that the one we see here is the real Moon and not what yours turned out to be :)

----
Chapter Summary

In which Star and Moon talk, Marco is late for school, a parent provides relationship advice, and there is something rotten in the state of Mewni.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was added during the 2018 re-edit.

If you are reading in order, ignore this note. If you got notified of this fic being updated and have read up to the end of the original Part III, consider hoping to the intro note on Chapter 31, which points out some of the new scenes. Most of this chapter, in particular, is new, as are the first few scenes of the next one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 22: Thicker than Water

“I… mom… I…” the princess choked up.

Star had no words. She had been thinking of things to say to her mom constantly for the past ten days, and now that she could finally speak to her, she had nothing, nothing at all. Instead, she just stared at Moon’s ghost, as the ethereal form blurred even further behind the liquid veil of her own tears.

What could she say? That she missed her? That she felt lost? That it hurt? That she regretted never having been the daughter Moon would have wanted to have? That she took back every single time she had complained about her rules and her advice? That she would do it all differently now if she could? Even telling her mom of her plans, to find her killer, to avenge her, even that felt hollow.

“I am so sorry, sweetie,” spoke Moon, sorrowfully. Her phantasmal hand passed right through Star’s golden hairs as she tried to comfort her daughter. The princess could not actually feel the touch, but she could imagine it, and that was almost enough. “I didn’t mean to leave you alone. Not like this. Not this soon.”

“But… but… you are here now, mommy! Aren’t you?” asked Star. “Can’t you stay? I know you can’t, like, touch things, and I think others can’t see you, but…” That had been the case with Glossaryck and Hekapoo, so it probably applied to her mom as well.

Still, it was better than she not being there at all.

“I can move things if you need me to, or let others know what you are saying. It’ll be just like before, you’ll see,” Star lied to herself, more so than to her mom.

“Star…” Moon raised her hand to interrupt her daughter’s ramblings.
There it was, behind the gentle gesture, that familiar tone of controlled exasperation, of disappointed impatience. It was one that the former queen often took on when talking to her troublesome child. But, this time, it was accompanied by a new impression, reflected more in her ghostly eyes than in her voice: that of deep, painful, regret.

A fresh pang of guilt hit the princess. Even in death, she caused her mother nothing but grief. “I am sorry, mom… I know.”

She did know. She knew that, whatever this was, it wasn’t permanent, and it wasn’t good. Seeing ghosts was never a positive sign, not on Earth, and not on Mewni. Either she was slowly going mad with grief, which was bad, or something was really causing the spirits of the dead to linger around her instead of moving on, which was, almost certainly, worse.

“Look, Star, I don’t have much time,” spoke Moon. “I wish I did. But I don’t. Star, I love you, and I am very proud of you. I don’t think I got to say that often enough, so I am saying it now.”

“Mom, I…” Star’s words failed her once more.

“But,” Moon added, sadly, cutting her off, “I also have to tell you that you must go back home. Today, if at all possible, and you have to stay there. I know it’s not easy, and I know it is not what you want. But, Star, you need to step up to the throne, and sooner rather than later, for your sake and that of Mewni.”

“Yeah, mom, I know that,” protested Star. “But, well, I need to avenge you first. I promised… I promised I’d find the thing that… that hurt you, and I would… I would…”

Moon’s expression hardened at that. “Star, right now Mewni needs their new queen safe, sound, and, most importantly, visible. The last thing you should be doing is putting yourself in needless danger. It’s certainly the last thing I’d want you to do!”

Star flinched. The rebuke hurt more than anything else her mom could have said. The princess felt her heart break, knowing that, even now, and despite her mom’s protestations of being proud of her, she was, in the end, a disappointment. She hadn’t felt right, she hadn’t felt like herself, until she told everyone that she was going to get justice for her mom. And now, now that she could tell her that, Moon herself disapproved of her actions.

“Sweetie, please. I am not trying to upset you,” pleaded the ghost. “But this is important: I don’t want you to put yourself in danger, to put your friends and your subjects in danger, to put River in danger. Not for my sake.”

“What if…” Star tried to say it, but her voice ran out on her. She gulped. It was hard to admit it. Hard to admit she really was being that selfish, that hateful. Hard to admit that it wasn’t exactly her mom that she was doing this for, even if it was about her mom. “What if I need to do this? For my sake? If I need to make them pay, to make it pay. What if I need to avenge you because I can’t live until the thing that killed you… doesn’t?”

“I am gone, Star. Killing that which killed me won’t bring me back, and it won’t make it stop hurting. Only time can do that. Believe me, I would know. I understand it better than anyone. I understand… because my mom died too, when I wasn’t much older than yourself,” the late queen admitted. “I know how much revenge feels like the answer, and how much it isn’t.”

Star remembered what Tom had said, about her mom, Moon the Undaunted, Moon the Lizard Vanquisher. She had also learned Eclipsa’s spell, also tried to use it. Maybe, or maybe not, she had missed on purpose.
The princess’ eyes scanned the ghost’s arms, but no trace of any dark tendrils could be seen reflected in the immaterial form. Not that it meant anything. After all, Moon’s arms, her real arms, were frozen in a crystal casket, buried underground below the marble base that was to hold her statue. Said statue was currently being sculpted, manually, without magic, the hard way. It was the way tradition demanded and, for once, it was also the only way Star would accept.

“I also know, all too well, that the kind of responsibilities I am leaving behind are not those any young girl should have to take for herself. I know how hard it is going to be. Believe me, I would give anything to spare you from that, Star… but… I don’t have anything to give, other than my advice to stay safe.” Moon’s translucent green visage looked at her helplessly, as if about to break down crying herself. “You will have to sacrifice so much for the sake of others. So, please, Star, let it at least be for the sake of the living and not the dead. Let time be your healer, not violence. I am gone, sweetie. Please, you need to stay safe, you need to be in Mewni, and you need to let me go.”

“But, mom, what if it comes back?” Star’s voice was quieter than a mouse’s whisper. “It... it defeated you, Hekapoo too. I... I am scared, and I am angry, but, well… isn’t protecting Mewni from this thing also my duty now?”

“Yes, Star, it is. If it comes to that. Which means it’s even more important for you to stay back home with your people, and guard them, and guide them, and reassure them, as their queen,” her mom insisted. “Again, Star, I am so sorry. I would not have you inherit that burden if I could still carry it for you. I know you don’t want it. I didn’t either. But you are right, your job is to protect the people of Mewni, from the thing that killed me and from anything else. It’s your job as it was mine before, and my mother’s before me… and you must do that job.”

“I can’t, mom! Not yet. Not even if I wanted,” replied Star regretfully. She had been feeling the weight of her decision ever since the night of the wake, and now she had confirmation that it had been the wrong one. But, even so, it was done. “I promised Eclipsa. I made a deal! I don’t think I can be queen now, even if I tried, not until, well, until I do what I said I would do…”

“Oh, sweetie, how I wish you hadn’t done that,” Moon shook her head. “Eclipsa was my mistake. You shouldn’t have to be the one to deal with her. Even so, if anything, that’s all the more reason for you not to leave Mewni. You cannot leave her alone there! You need to inform the high commission... what’s left of it! Eclipsa is evil, Star!”

She hadn’t seemed evil. Nothing Star had heard about her, before or since, pointed at her being evil either, and she had researched the records on the matter thoroughly after their encounter. Well, as thoroughly as Star could, under the circumstances.

“Actually, mom, are you sure that…”

A loud knock on the door interrupted the mewman.

“Star, is everything alright?” she heard Marco’s voice through the door. She had almost forgotten that she was back in his home, in her old conjured room. “Can I come in?” he asked, tentatively.

“Not now!” she snapped back. She felt a bit guilty about yelling like that to him. But she needed to talk to her mom, while she was still there…

Star turned around, back towards where Moon’s ghost had been just a moment ago. She saw an empty bed, a green wallpaper, a mirror that would never again show her the face she most wanted to see. Her mom was gone.

She had never been able to control when the ghosts showed up, nor when they went away, except
by keeping her eyes fixed on them. Now all she could do was to wait for her to show up again… if she ever did.

“Arggggg!” she grunted. Her eyes glowed green as she pointed her wand at the door.

She dipped down hastily, and, a moment later, an emerald padlock and a sound-proof barrier had been erected between her room and the rest of the house. Maybe, that way, her mom might decide to show up again.

Dammit, Marco! Why did he had to have such lousy timing?

----

Marco lazily swirled around his Captain Blanche’s Sugar Seeds cereal with his spoon. He wasn’t hungry. Part of it was that he hadn’t really slept all that well last night. Instead, he had mostly stayed up, long past midnight, worrying about Star.

He had tried knocking on her door three more times the previous night, without success. So far, she hadn’t come out of her room that morning either. Not that she had to go to school with him anymore, of course, but Marco had hoped she would at least join him for breakfast. If the scissors still worked, he would have probably used them to break into Star’s room, whether she wanted to or not, just to check up on her.

Maybe he ought to try the window?

He sighed. Well, at least he knew she couldn’t leave without him. It was the main reason he had insisted in keeping the keys to the demon prince’s hearse, after all. Tomorrow morning they were all going to meet Tom down in the underworld, to start their journey towards Sam’s ominous party. Marco was Star’s ride… and Jackie’s.

“Marco, please hurry up and eat,” called his dad from the kitchen. “You are going to be late for school!”

Right! Today he was going to high school, tomorrow he was embarking on a quest through hell. Surreal barely covered it!

Then, he realized something: he hadn’t told his parents he was going away. He was about to take off, and there was a not-small chance that he might not make it back, and he was acting to them like nothing was happening. For all they knew, this was just like any other Thursday morning, and tomorrow just a normal Friday too. They didn’t know he would not be around for breakfast next day, or the week after that, or, perhaps, the month after that...

Between whatever was happening to Star, and terrifying dreams of Hekapoo, and memories of a version of himself that was hard as forged iron, he hadn’t had a chance to think about his mom and dad. What would they feel, when they didn’t find him in his room tomorrow? What if he didn’t come back for weeks, or months, or not at all?

Star had lost her mom, without being able to say so much as goodbye to her. What if Marco never got to see his parents again? What if they never got to see him again?

The problem was: he had to do this. He had to be there for Star. And there was no way his parents would understand, no way they would allow it. How would you explain to a parent that their only child was about to go risk their lives in some literal hell dimension, only to travel to a possibly even more dangerous place in pursuit of a regicidal fire-monster? He hadn’t even told them about the sixteen years he spent in Hekapoo’s dimension the first time around, nor could he imagine doing
But those sixteen years had been eight minutes to them. This time? Well, at best he would be gone
those three days of Sam’s invitation, assuming they spent the rest of the time in Hekapoo’s domain.
That was still more than enough time for his parents to worry. Heck, it was long enough that he
would be considered legally missing! And it wasn’t at all a given that it would be just those three
days. If he left without saying anything, his parents might search for weeks, for months… for
years, without ever knowing what happened to their son. He just couldn’t do that to them.

“Hey, dad, I think it’ll be fine for me to be late today…” Marco stated softly.

“Really? Are you sick, Marco?” Rafael asked. “You are usually so worried about leaving so
precisely on time…”

Marco smiled at that remark. It was true, of course. But, well, his haste to get out of the house in
the mornings had never been solely about his attendance record. Not that he didn’t care about the
later, at least somewhat. But, mostly, it had been due to Jackie and their shared nod ‘tradition’. For
multiple reasons, that wasn’t so important anymore. Some of those reasons were really good, like
the fact that Jackie was now his girlfriend. Others, though…

“There is something important that I need to tell you guys,” he stated, taking on a calm but serious
expression. “Can you get mom?”

His dad nodded. A few moments after, Angie Diaz was with them as well.

Now they were both staring at him, and he wasn’t sure exactly how to start. The last thing he
wanted was to terrify his parents, or to have them try to stop him from going. He knew he would
have to disobey them if they did. But, well, they did have a right to know, didn’t they? At least
they should know why he was going away, if maybe not where.

“Marco, is everything alright?” asked his mom, sounding worried. Well, her concern wasn’t
without reason, after all, Marco thought.

“Is it about Star?” his dad asked. “We know she had to go back to Mewni for more than a week,
without saying anything, and now she is back and hasn’t said a single word to us. Not that we mind
having her back, of course, but, well, that just doesn’t sound like Star. It’s weird seeing her be
this… quiet. Is she ok?”

Marco smiled a bittersweet smile. Right, obviously his parents weren’t quite oblivious enough to
miss everything that was going on. They had just felt it wasn’t their place to ask. Marco had been
hesitant to say much about it. Back when Star had left, he had just told them she had needed to go
back to Mewni because of political matters, which was true, but hardly the whole story.

“Star’s mom died about two weeks ago,” Marco explained. Both parents gasped in reaction.

“Oh, that’s terrible news!” expressed Rafael.

“Poor girl,” commented Angie. “Is she holding alright? How about you, Marco? Why didn’t you
tell us sooner?”


“Not sure. Yes, I think so. And, well… there is a lot going on,” Marco answered his mom’s
questions first, then proceeded to address his father’s. “Look, it’s a long story, Queen Moon didn’t
just die, she was killed, by… by something. And Star, well, she delivered this whole speech,
saying that she plans to avenge her mom,” Marco kept to himself just how hair-raising that original declaration had been, or his own reservations about it. “And, well, I am going to go with her and help her.”

His parents stared silently at him for a moment, shocked. He took the opportunity to keep going.

“Look, I know you might not approve, or that you might worry about me. But we are leaving tomorrow, and I am not sure how long we will be away. And I didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye and…” he stammered.

“Marco Diaz!” yelled her mom. “You are certainly not doing anything of the sort!”

That was what he was afraid of. He knew that they wouldn’t understand. He was afraid that their last interaction would have to be them yelling at him, arguing with him, forbidding him to go, and he having to disobey them regardless. He had to do this, to be there for Star. He was going to leave, no matter whether or not they approved. But he didn’t want to leave without saying anything. Even if the last words between him and his parents were angry ones, that was still better than leaving without them ever knowing why, and without them having any idea what might have happened to him.

“Mom, I am sorry, but, well, I am going,” he said, looking down. “I am going whether you approve of it or not, whether you try to stop me or not. I just wanted to tell you guys, well, that I’ll be gone for a while... and that I love you both.”

“Marco, I don’t understand,” spoke his dad. “Isn’t this something for King River to fix? For the knights? I remember they have knights, we went with them when… when…”

“When I was captured by Toffee,” Marco finished the sentence for him. “See? I have been doing this sort of stuff with Star for a while, you know I have, and we have been fine. I’ll be fine. This is just like that,” he lied, “only it is even more important for Star, because it’s about what happened to her mom.”

“I am not sure a girl Star’s age should be thinking along those lines, Marco,” reproached her mom with a sigh. “And I definitely don’t think you should be. Rafael is right, leave it to…”

“To King River? To the knights of Mewni?” Marco asked. “I can’t. Because Star can’t. She has the magic wand, remember? With Moon gone, she is the only one who can do this sort of stuff, and I have to be there to support her, because I am…”

… her boyfriend.

“... her best friend.” There were only so many bombshells he could drop on his parents in a single conversation. “As for what Star should or shouldn’t be thinking about. Well, I can’t say I blame her. Over the last week, I have been thinking about what I’d do, if I were in her position, if something had happened to either of you… Can you tell me you’d feel differently than she does, if something were to happen to me?”

“Of course not, Marco,” spoke his dad. “But we would… I mean, we would not try to… to fight anyone, we would go to the police and…”

“Dad, Star is basically Queen of Mewni now,” Marco sighed. He knew she wouldn’t like hearing him say that, but River’s regency was just temporary, in the end Star was the law of the land as far as Mewni was concerned. “She is the police.”

The two seemed to stare silently at him for a few seconds. Until Rafael finally spoke, “Um, Marco,
are you sure she has to do this?”

“Yes.”

“And are you sure you need to go with her?” his dad continued.

“Yes.”

“Fine. Then, your mom and I, and I assume King River, are going too,” he stated. “After all, you don’t have a magic wand, and you are going to help her, so we should be going to help you!”

Marco blinked. That was certainly not a possible response that had occurred to him. In retrospect, they had gone after him in full knight armor the night Toffee took him prisoner, so it wasn’t entirely unprecedented. But there was no way he was going to let his mom and dad endanger themselves like that! Which, ok, sort of did put into perspective how their end of the conversation must have felt, but still...

“Dad, mom, I don’t have a magic wand, but I know karate, and I have been on adventures with Star before,” not to mention having spent sixteen years in a deadly dimension, obtaining forbidden knowledge about terrifying magical rituals that he was slowly regaining. Again, only so many truths he could dump on them all at the same time. “I can help her, a little bit. You can’t help us. If anything, having you guys tag along would put us at greater risk. Besides, we need to go through… a foreign kingdom, and she only could get passages for a few of us.”

A few further moments of silence passed, while Marco’s parents exchanged a tense look.

“Is King River going?” inquired Angie.

“Yes,” Marco lied.

“Is there anyone who would be better than you at keeping Star safe? Someone you’d want her to use one of those passages on, instead of you, for her sake?” his mom tried.

That was a good point, actually. Maybe there was someone around that would be better at keeping Star safe. Rhombulus? Lekmet? Kelly? But he doubted Sam’s invitations were transferable to any of them. Besides, it was not only her physical safety Marco was concerned about… “No.”

“I don’t like this, Marco, I really really don’t,” his mom said. “But I guess there is nothing we can really do to stop you, and nothing to change your mind. Is there? ...Just, promise us you’ll be back safe?”

His dad looked like he was about to break down crying.

“Yeah, I promise,” Marco lied again, looking down at the floor.

He had been as truthful as he could, and they had been even more understanding than he could have possibly hoped for, and yet this seemed like them both holding out on each other. He hadn’t said half of what he feared about the journey ahead. Meanwhile, his parents both looked like they were restraining themselves from… what? Yelling at him? Ordering him to stay? Or...

They both jumped to hug him at once.

“Marco, we love you too. More than you can comprehend,” said his mom. “I understand this is something you need to do, and that we cannot help you. I get it, even if I still don’t like it. And, well, as hard as it is to accept, I appreciate that you are telling us, rather than just taking off. But,
please, make sure to come back. Do absolutely anything you have to do to keep yourself and Star safe. I mean it, Marco. But, also, other than that… try not to do anything you are not comfortable with, and try not to let Star do anything she will regret either,” she advised.

His dad, blubbering with tears and sobbing loudly, was far less eloquent. “My little boy has grown into such a fiercely loyal young man!”

Marco hugged them both, and reassured them that he would be fine. He felt relieved that the talk had gone as well as it did, and, at the same time, terrified at the thought of leaving his parents behind like this. Worried that he might still be lying to them.

----

“Hey, Jackie,” she heard Marco call quietly.

The girl pushed one foot on the back of the board, the other off from it, stopping its movement and standing it vertically in front of herself. She had skipped lunch at the cafeteria today. Instead, she had spent most of the break skateboarding inside whatever little space the Echo Creek courtyard provided, trying to get her mind off of things.

“Yo, Diaz,” she attempted her usual non-chalantness. Even after all they had been through, old habits did die hard, specially back in a familiar environment. “Didn’t see you in class earlier. I thought you had decided to skip school today. Should really have known better,” she teased him with a smile.

Honestly, she had already been thinking that maybe she should have just cut class herself, especially if Marco wasn’t going to be around anyways. She could have spent the entire day riding her board through town, doing her favorite ramps, thinking stuff over, instead of zoning out in class. It wasn’t something she did very often, perhaps just once before in the last year. But it wasn’t like it would have mattered today, either. They were about to leave Earth for who knows how long, after all. What was the harm in missing one extra day of Miss Skullnick’s lectures?

“Actually, I only got here after third period,” Marco confessed, embarrassed. They kept walking further and further away from the more crowded parts of the school. Even though they were alone, Marco’s voice was down to a whisper. “After I told them we are leaving tomorrow, my parents wanted to spend time together. In fact, they insisted on having today’s afternoon be family time. They are trying to get Star to join too, but she seems really hard to reach…”

“You told your parents!??” she asked him, surprised. Honestly, the thought of letting her mom know hadn’t occurred to her.

Marco looked around, nervously. “Not everything. Nothing about hell or creepy masquerade balls. I just told them about Star’s mom, and that I am going to help her,” he said quietly. “It just didn’t feel right, to leave without saying anything to them.”

“Right,” Jackie said, half in automatic. But, of course, Marco was right, it wouldn’t be fair to the Diazes, and it wouldn’t be fair to her mom. Jackie felt a sudden pang of guilt at the realization. Well, that meant she had a pretty difficult conversation ahead of her today. One more thing to worry about… “Hey, Marco, want to go for a walk? Outside here, I mean.”

He nodded. “Sure, Jackie.”

Frankly, the Echo Creek Academy fence was even easier to climb than the walls of St Olga’s had been. Marco followed her effortlessly, too. Even more effortlessly than she would have expected,
actually. He also didn’t seem too concerned about missing the rest of his classes. Probably, he was thinking along the same lines she was on that subject.

They walked in silence for a while, headed roughly in the direction of the pier. Jackie was mostly thinking about what to tell her mom, and about Star, and hell, and the invitation, and…

God. How she wished she could get up on her board! It always helped her untangle her thoughts. The streets around them were deserted too, perfect for skateboarding. Still, there would be time for that later. Marco didn’t have his own board - he still didn’t really quite know how to use one - and it’s not like she could give him a ride, not if she really wanted to take any jumps. In the end, however, she still wanted to be around him more than she wanted to be on the ramps.

Although, perhaps, she wasn’t quite as sure about that as she would have been just a few days ago...

“Jackie, listen, are you alright?” asked her boyfriend cautiously after a while.

“Sure, dude, no worries,” she reassured him with a smile. “How about you, though?”

She could tell Marco was worried, about Star, about their plan, about his parents, and about something else. Maybe about his dream? She felt he hadn’t told her all about it yet. Something told her that he remembered more of those sixteen years than what he let on, and that whatever was buried in those memories was harsh stuff.

“I... I am not alright, none of us are,” Marco shook his head. He had stopped walking, and turned around to face her with a concerned look in his eyes. “But that’s the point, Jackie. It was a rhetorical question. I can tell you are worried too, you know? Can you at least tell me why? Is it about yesterday afternoon? Or about the invitation thing? The spell? Something else?”

“Seriously, it’s no biggie, Marco,” Jackie shrugged.

It truly wasn’t. Star had just lost her mom. Marco had lost, well, whatever Hekapoo was to him, and, in addition to that, had to deal with the fact that there was this whole forgotten past catching up to him now. Compared to him, what did she have to worry about? A dumb role written in a card and a bunch of childish teenage insecurities? It would have been ridiculous to even bring those up to him now.

“Jackie...” Marco begun. Then he fell silent. They walked a few more steps until he turned back towards her again, “You can talk to me, too, you know? I feel that you are always there when I need to figure something out, and I know that you were there for Star too, back when we all started going out together. But you never talk about your own problems...”

“Well, Marco, I don’t have that many,” she smiled. “I am pretty lucky, honestly. The stuff I worry about, well, it’s just nonsense...”

“Jackie, if that were true, then you would have already told me,” he smiled at her. It was a cute smile, that alone was more than enough for her. “We have had plenty of time to talk nonsense. But, if it worries you, then it isn’t nonsense, not to me.”

“You are worried about Star, Marco,” Jackie stated. “I know you are. I am too. Worried that she is in pain. Worried that she will do something rash. I understand that she is in your mind a lot, and it’s not like that’s the only thing in your mind now...”

“Jackie... I...” he started talking. Jackie held a hand up, silencing him.
“Marco, please, let me finish.” If she didn’t say it now, she might not be able to do so later. “Yesterday, you told me you wanted to leave me behind so that you could be there for Star. I get why. Hell, Marco, I even admire you for it, for being there for those you love, when the going gets truly tough, when few would blame you for staying behind. It is part of what I love about you. But I’d be lying to you, and lying to myself, if I said it didn’t hurt to know for certain who you’d pick, if you really had to...”

She looked down, frustrated. Frustrated that it mattered this much, that she was laying it on him. There were real threats they had to face now, life or death stuff. There was a prophecy, and a devil playing games, and who knows what else. They had bigger problems than her wounded ego.

“Jackie, that’s not it!” the boy protested. “I love you, Jackie. I have loved you since we were little kids. Yes, I like Star too, but it’s not like she is more important to me than you are. It’s only, well, she really needs me now. You would be fine without me. Hell, you might be better off without the kind of boyfriend that drags you into all this chaos, all this danger! But Star really needs... a friend. She needs someone by her side now, unconditionally.”

“You are right, Marco, of course,” agreed Jackie. And yet, at the same time... “But, if it wasn’t just Star? If we both needed someone? I am not saying I do. I don’t. But if we both needed you the same, and both loved you the same, can you tell me you would not still choose her?”

“No, Jackie, I... I wouldn’t,” he tried. His eyes avoiding her own, looking down at the pavement below.

“Marco, can I ask you a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Don’t lie to me,” she said, flashing him a bittersweet smile made of fondness and fragility. “I don’t think I deserve that.”

Marco stared at her. He opened his mouth and then closed it again. She could tell that he cared, that he wanted to reassure her and, at the same time, that he was honoring her request.

“I love you, Jackie,” he whispered tenderly. “That’s not a lie.”

She nodded. Marco walked up towards her, and hugged her.

“Jackie...” he seemed to be trying hard to find the right words. “I don’t have to choose. Do I?”

“No, Marco, you don’t,” she replied. She returned his embrace. It felt real. It felt loving, caring, warm.

She wished she could feel reassured by it. She did, a bit. But in the back of her mind, a nagging doubt refused to leave, a worry that someday, he would have to choose, and the knowledge that he wouldn’t choose her.

“I am glad,” he remarked.

“Yeah...” she replied, “me too.”

----

“Hey mom, do you have a minute?” asked Jackie, knocking quietly on the studio door.
“Um, of course, Jackie, come on in,” was the mellow, almost trance-like response. She opened the door to find her mom sitting in the carpet, in lotus position.

Her mom’s laptop, left carelessly lying on the sofa, was still showing a series of jolted notes and links. The aging device hadn’t even had the time to go into sleep mode yet. Meanwhile, the rest of the room was a mess of loose printout pages, marked in blue and red ink. Most of the papers were on the floor, since the desk space was occupied by various foreign crafts and cheap gemstones. The later also covered most of whatever space remained in the four bookshelves, after you accounted for the overflowing, hazapardly stacked, books. What little was exposed of the walls behind those, was covered in african and south american textiles.

The rest of the house, not quite counting Jackie’s room or the garage, was an spotless exemplar of suburban cleanliness and organization. Yet, Jackie always felt that it was this chaotic studio where her mom truly seemed most at ease.

Her dad didn’t usually work from home, and thus didn’t have his own studio room like her mom did. In fact, this whole week he was away for work, probably filming on location or something like that. Jackie should call him too, she supposed, to say farewell. But maybe it was better if she just told her mom first, and had her fill him in before she called. This was hard enough to do in person.

“Sorry, Jackie, I’ve been working on this article for next month’s issue, but there is just something that doesn’t quite feel right about it. So, I was trying some mindfulness, some sati, to see if that helps order my mind,” she explained with smile. “But, well, you are here now, and that’s part of the moment too. Come, sit, and let yourself be aware of your breathing. Then you can tell me what troubles you.”

Jackie smiled inwardly. Her mom had been, and still was, such a flower-child.

The girl carefully moved aside a few stacks of papers, and sat too, crossing her legs. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. It did sort of help her focus on what she wanted to say, she had to admit. Still, she preferred her skateboard for that sort of thing. She knew her mom would just say that it was a kind of meditation too, probably with a few hindi or tibetan words to explain why exactly doing jumps was a form of modern yoga or something.

“So, tell me, what do you want to talk about?” her mom asked. “Is it about that boy you are dating? The Marco kid? You two have known each other for so long. Angie and I used to joke you were dating all the way back in first grade. Funny how that turned out to be prophetic...”

“No, mom, it’s not about Marco,” Jackie stopped her. Then she realized she couldn’t explain tomorrow’s trip without Star, and she couldn’t explain Star without Marco. Um. This was going to take a while. “Well, it sort of is, I guess. I mean, it’s not what you are thinking, though.”

“If it is,” her mom chuckled, “then just please make sure you two are using protection.”

“Mom!” Jackie complained, annoyed, to the amusement of the woman sitting in front of her. “Look, it’s a bit more complicated than that, alright? Do you know Star?” she skipped forward, impatiently.

Her mom seemed to think for a bit. “Mmmm... the exchange kid, right? Beautiful name. Seemed like such a lovely free-spirited girl. What does she have to do with you and Marco? Wait! She is staying with Angie and Rafael, right?”

“Um? Yeah, she is. But, I mean, she is Marco’s best friend, and... I guess you don’t even know where she is an exchange student from...” trailed Jackie, suddenly realizing just how hard it was
going to be to explain the situation to her mom. “Look, she comes from a place called Mewni, and
she is this magical warrior princess. Does... does that make any sense to you?”

“Of course,” her mom stated simply, unfazed.

“Oh of course?” the girl asked, shocked at how well her mom was taking things. She knew she had
mostly gotten her own ability to take things in stride from her, but this was a bit much.

“Yeah, Jackie, you are also a princess if you want to, and a warrior, and anything else you want to
be, my little Ocean Breeze.” Her mom shrugged. “But what’s the issue?”

“No, mom, you don’t get it. She is an actual princess, with subjects and a kingdom to rule, and...”
This was going to be impossible. There was simply no way to bring her mom up to speed with
everything that was going on. Jackie sighed, frustrated.

Her mom turned out to face her. “Actual princesses are not more real than the other sort of
princesses, you know? Power structures only have the strength they do because we believe in
them, Jackie. I am not sure where this girl comes that has such constructs still in place. Denmark?
Belgium? The Netherlands? I’d think even I’ll would have heard of it if she were, say, part of the
British or Spanish royal families. As an aside, most of those are not actually ruling monarchs, so
it’s a bit different that what you might be thinking of, but...”

“Look, that’s fine, mom, but, well, she is. A ‘ruling monarch’, I mean. The kingdom is really hers,
like, full blown fairy tale style... or, I guess like, middle ages style,” It wasn’t like Mewni had a
parliament, right? Or maybe it did? “But, mom, that’s not the point...”

“Ok, so, let’s say, like, Brunei? Oman?” her mom continued. “... No, wait, you are right, Jackie,
that’s not the point. The point is that, either way, it is a consensus construction, and it might not
even be a good thing for her to be placed so high above others either. Look, structures of power
oppress the powerless more, of course, but often they oppress the powerful as well, by constraining
them to fulfill strict performative roles...”

Jackie blinked. Ok, maybe her mom wasn’t so far out of the loop as she had thought. It had taken
that fiasco at Song Day for Jackie to realize what a shitty deal being princess of Mewni could be at
times. Her mom had managed to figure out the same from just the ‘princess’ title alone. Of course,
now Star was going to be queen soon, and that turned out to be an even shittier deal.

“...which is why you shouldn’t feel jealous of this Star girl,” her mom continued. “I mean, do you
think that Marco likes her, or just that he ought to like her?”

Wait. What!? Oh! So that’s what her mom thought was going on! Jackie almost burst out laughing.

“Actually, mom, I know he likes her, and she likes him too,” Jackie explained. “She is her
girlfriend too. We both are!” She tried to sound confident about that part, mostly to see if her mom
would be surprised by that, at least.

“Ah, I see,” her mom looked up at the ceiling pondering something. “And you are all using
protection, right?”

“Mom!!” Jackie exclaimed, flustered.

“Ok, ok, I’ll assume I have told you that part often enough by now. It’s just that it’s really not fun
having a kid at your age, or an STD at any age, you know?” she insisted. “But, alright, how do you
feel about that? About you and Marco? About him and Star?”
That also wasn’t what she wanted to talk to her mom about today…

Then again, it wasn’t like it hadn’t also been on her mind.

“I, I mean. I was the one who proposed it, mom, sorta. So…” Her mom smiled gently at her, urging Jackie to go on. For once, she wasn’t interrupting her, nor running away into a tangent with some half-formed idea of what her daughter was trying to say. “Well, he said that he is glad that he doesn’t have to choose between the two of us. But I know that, if he had to, he would choose Star. Just trust me on that one, mom, he would. At the same time, I love him, and he does love me too, and it’s something that has been wonderful for me so far. But, well, I don’t know how I should feel about the whole thing…”

“There is no should feel. There is only how you feel. We cannot control how others love us, and we cannot control who we love, Jackie. What we can control is how we show our love,” her mom advised. “It looks like you do talk a lot about how you each feel, and that’s good. If you feel being with him makes you happy, and that you are either prepared for him one day not being there, or alright with him loving someone else more, then that’s a valid choice. Understand that it is not a referendum on you if he likes someone else, though, or even if he likes someone else more. That’s all on him. And, on the other hand, if being in that situation makes you unhappy, in any way, you have every right to step out of that relationship at any time. Love doesn’t oblige you to be with someone that hurts you, even when it isn’t their fault that they do.”

Jackie nodded, surprised by how much her mom’s perspective was similar to her own. She supposed that she should have given more credit to the influence of the woman who raised her on the views she held.

“The most important part is to take care of yourself first, Jackie,” she continued. “That being the case, though, at some point love is about trusting others, trusting them not to hurt you needlessly, trusting them to take the decisions that make them happy and being happy for them when they do, letting them go if they want to go, and trusting that the right ones will come back.”

“Mom,” Jackie interrupted her, suddenly seizing on that last part. “Do you trust me? To take the right decisions?”

“Of course! I mean, I am not saying I can’t ever see you get your heart broken. But I know I raised a smart young girl with a loving soul and healthy boundaries, who will be alright in the end, no matter what,” her mom observed. “And, you are young still. It is a good time to love without too many constraints and without having to necessarily plan the practical aspects of a life with someone… or even multiple someones.”

“How about on things other than relationships, though? Do you trust me with that too?”

“I trust your judgement in everything about your own life, Jackie,” she replied without hesitation. The girl realized that her mom’s unqualified vote of confidence was the one thing she had really needed to hear. There was no way she could explain to her everything that was happening, not today. But, then again, maybe she didn’t have to…

“Mom, there is something else going on. Something that you might not believe if I told you, that is scary and messy and complicated. I am going to be gone, not sure for how long, and I want you to not worry about me,” the girl stated, matter-of-factly. “I want you to know that I know what I am doing, that I love you. I want you to trust that I will come back.”

“Uh? Jackie? Wait a second… Where are you going?” her mom asked surprised, suddenly jolted
awake from her post-meditative calm. “When?”

“I can’t tell you. It would take too long to explain. But I am not going to be around for a few days. Maybe more. I will miss school, and it will seem unreasonable and irresponsible. But I want you to trust that I am being responsible, that I would get help from you if I needed it and thought it could make a difference, that I am doing the right thing as I best understand it. Is that fair to you?”

“Jackie, I am your mother, and you are saying you are leaving, without telling me where, or when you’ll come back. Of course that’s not fair to me!” her mom protested. She took a deep breath. “But you are also asking me to trust you, and I do. Just, if there is anything else I can do, well… I love you, Jackie.”

Jackie leaned in to hug her mom. “If you get worried, talk to Marco’s parents, and be ready to believe some really crazy stuff…”

----

The ironic thing was, last time Star had been here, the place had been full of people and loud cheering. Now she came here to be alone.

There was no concert in Echo Creek Arena tonight. The gates were closed, the fence padlocked, the billboard sign still covered by a huge grey blanket, awaiting repairs. She had just flown down onto the stage, carried on by a sour, muted, pale green, version of Cloudy.

She had fallen asleep close to dawn, after waiting the whole night for her mom’s ghost to come back. It never did. Neither had Hekapoo or Glossaryck shown up that night, or today. Star woke up past noon, leaving Marco’s home through the window. She had spent the entire afternoon roaming the skies above this strange human town that had once felt like a second home to her. Now the last reds of the sunset were slowly dimming on the other side of the bleachers.

“Look, we are alone now, alright?” she asked the empty evening air. “Can we finish talking?”

No response.

“Mom? Please?” pleaded Star.

Nothing.

In the past, Star would have considered calling up Janna, instead of spending the entire afternoon alone. That was no longer an option, not with the way the human girl seemed to be reacting towards her these days.

She gave it one more try, “… Mommy?”

A chilly breeze blew along the platform as dusk fully set in. The princess looked around, hoping it was a sign. It wasn’t.

“Look, I blew up at Marco last night, and I sneaked out from his home today. He is worried enough about me without bringing up the fact that I see ghosts. So, well, if I am going to be creepily haunted and warned off, the least you could do is let me actually finish talking to you!” she blurted, angrily. Her eyes were still red from crying.

Nothing.

“Fine! Back to the original plan, then,” Star shouted to the night. “I’ll go find the thing that killed
you and avenge you, whether you want me to or not!”

“Star, honestly, is the tantrum really necessary?” came Moon’s voice from behind her at last. Star turned around to see the ghostly shape standing in front of the stage curtains, looking miserable. “This is hard enough as it is... for both of us. Hard enough on Marco too, I’d imagine. Pretty sure he doesn’t want to see you in danger any more than River or I do.”

“Mom… I…” Again, words failed Star, despite it all.

“Not to mention the fact that you are putting him in harm’s way too,” admonished Moon. “Don’t you worry about him?”

She did. “I’ll keep him safe, mom! I’ll keep everyone safe…” she swallowed “…everyone else.”

“That’s all I want you to do, Star: to keep your friends safe, your people safe, yourself safe,” the dead queen pressed on. “Please be reasonable, Star. Let me go. Go back to Mewni. That’s better for everyone.”

“Mom, I can’t, my promise to Eclipsa…” Star begun.

“Alright,” Moon cut her off with a raised hand and an exasperated expression. It slowly melted into a much softer look of concern. “Then don’t be queen. It’s fine, sweetie, it’s fine. Just be safe, please, it’s all I ask,” she pleaded.

“Don’t be queen…?” the younger mewman asked confused. It was the first time, in fifteen years, that her mom had raised that as a valid possibility. Star didn’t even know her mom could consider that as an option. It was surreal.

“If you don’t want to go back to Mewni… if you really can’t be queen… if you really made a magical vow not to take the throne unless you take on this foolish quest first…” Her mom trailed off, as if thinking really hard about what she was about to say. “Then, well... how about staying here, sweetie? With Marco, and your other friend as well?”

Star’s brain failed to process the words. Was her mom proposing she abandon all of her responsibilities? That she break with tradition? It wasn’t that it wasn’t a tempting idea, but...

“You always told me how much you liked Earth,” Moon continued. “Perhaps you can stay a little while, until you are ready for Mewni again. All I want, Star, is for you to be happy.”

That did it. That broke the illusion. Star stopped looking down, stopped shaking. She fixed Moon’s ghost with a murderous glare, her hand tensing around the wand. Black tendrils tightened around her arms, climbing further and further up through the inside of her veins, towards her shoulders. Green light reflected on her reddened eyes. “You are not my mom!”

Moon would never have told Star to run away from her responsibilities. She would have wanted her daughter to be happy, that much was true. And, if it came to that, the princess was willing to consider that her mom might put her immediate safety before a lot of very other important things. But she would never advice her to desert Mewni, to abandon her people forever, to flee her obligations just like that! The thought wouldn’t even have occurred to her mother, not even as a remote possibility!

The princess thought back to the ghosts she had been seeing. Glossaryk had been off but, then again, Glossaryk was always off. And Hekapoo had sounded strange, but it wasn’t as if Star knew her well enough to tell for certain. But her mom? She knew her mom. This thing was not her mom!
“No. I am not,” answered a deep voice, a male voice coming from the apparition that had so far pretended to be her mother. “But, next time we meet, remember this, Star. Remember that I tried to do this the easy way.”

Not-Moon was now giving Star a scornful glare, flashing her a mocking smirk. It was then that the princess noticed the teeth. They were sharp and feral, and not mewman at all.

Before her eyes, her mom’s image began to change: fingers merging together, scales replacing her hair, the ribcage broadening to the sides, a monstrous snout expanding forward from her mouth. Her royal dress also shifted and reshaped itself, into a somber suit and tie.

Toffee’s face flashed the princess an incredibly disturbing grin. “SURPRISE!!”

Then, cackling madly, he vanished into an explosion of ghostly green smoke, right before Star’s blast could reach him.

She had raised her wand the moment the ghostly form had begun shifting, she had fired the moment she recognized the new shape, and yet it hadn’t been fast enough. The curtain behind where the lizard monster had stood was now ablaze with the force of her spell.

Instead of putting out the burning curtain, the princess fired another blast, and then another, and another still. Soon it wouldn’t be just the billboard sign, but the entire arena that had been burned to the ground. Star didn’t much care.

She left before the fire trucks arrived.

----

The mewman minstrel pushed open the door to the tower slowly, making the least noise he conceivably could. He entered his own studio with a sense of restless apprehension about him, skittishly looking around like an anxious mouse. She smiled inwardly and let him settle in. She let him close the door, pace around, and sit in front of his dingy little piano. She let him get comfortable.

“Hello, Ruberiot,” the girl finally spoke, softly, letting her presence be known as she swooped down from the ceiling right behind him.

The musician jolted back up, letting out a shrill cry of terror. Falsetto, she might have called it, if she thought it had been intentional. He was quite pale, yet not pale enough that she wasn’t tempted… tempted to kill him, to have a snack. But no, that would have to wait. She had bigger game to hunt right now.

“How is old King River doing?” Princess White asked, casually.

“He is in good physical health, but heartbroken,” Ruberiot explained after he recovered somewhat from the shock. “He has assumed the regency of Mewni in theory but, well, I don’t believe he has made a single formal act of government since the wake…”

“Ah, well, fortunately, that won’t be a problem for much longer. Rest assured, your people will
soon have the ruler they deserve,” she promised the pitiful creature. It filled her unbeating heart with malevolent glee to know that she meant it. Mewni did deserve what was coming to them, the whole craven moronic lot of them. “How about the royal brat? Still hiding away, crying about her mommy?”

“I… well…” the songstrel tried to dissemble, poorly.

“Ruberiot, dear, I’d hate to believe you are hiding something from me,” the vampire pouted. In an instant, her body was inches away of his, a long fingernail gently caressing the middle of his adam’s apple. “I hope you haven’t been thinking of betraying me…”

She could smell his sweat, rich with mortal terror. “No, never! I couldn’t possibly, princess!” he protested.

Indeed he could not. He literally couldn’t have warned Star, or River, or Rhombulus, or anyone else, even if he tried. The words would not come out. His memory would fail him. His mind would conclude all of its own that it wasn’t a good idea to speak, that he had decided not to speak, seemingly of his own free will, or that he had never even met Princess White. Fear was an incredibly effective prison for a weak mind, and the songstrell’s was weaker than most.

It had been so easy to mesmerize him, to plant insidious suggestions and impulses into his mind, to mold him as a tool. He was made for this, meant for this, to be used by his betters. The same had been true, more or less, of the other mewman servants and knights now under her thrall. Quite frankly, Princess White hadn’t had to so much as put effort into manipulating another’s mind since the little witch back in St O’s, the one who fancied the demon prince, Star’s former friend.

The vampire grinned at the thought: former. Slowly, she was fulfilling her promise to ‘Prince Jack’ - she had long learned who and what he, or rather she, truly was - to leave the three of them alone. As alone as she could make them!

“Ruberiot, answer me.” She looked him in the eyes. Windows to the soul, windows to the mind.

“Where is Star?”

“She left last night, your majesty,” the songstrel finally admitted. “I… I am not sure when she is coming back.”

Ah, so it was time already? Indeed this might be it, Snow White thought, the time for her to make her move. Of course, she would need to make sure that it wasn’t a false alarm, an unrelated trip. She needed to know that the annoying mewman princess wouldn’t be back in a day or two to grab provisions or any other frustrating backstep like that. But, if she wasn’t, if she had finally decided to follow through with her foolhardy promise to hunt whatever had killed the previous queen, then it was time for Snow White to assume her rightful place. She had been a queen once before, and a ruler many more times than that. No revolutions this time around, though, just the classics. Mewni seemed as good a place as any for her to give good old monarchy a second chance.

King River could not stop her. The pitiful forces of this kingdom could not oppose her. Some players, like Lekmet and Rhombulus, remained somewhat minor threats, perhaps, but she already had thought a dozen ways of dealing with them. She had learned much about them these past two weeks, after all, and they knew nothing of her. White had been planning her move since the day she arrived to Mewni, a stowaway in the demon prince’s carriage. All she really needed now was to be absolutely certain that Princess Star was out of the picture.

The vampire princess didn’t know what had killed the old queen. As long as it didn’t come after her, she didn’t much care. But it was extraordinarily fortuitous that it had removed both mother and
daughter in such a tidy manner, at least for now.

Sure, there was a chance that the mewman princess would return, someday, if she succeeded where Queen Moon had failed. But it hardly mattered. Princess White didn’t intend to rule this dump forever. In a way, it would be even better if Star did return, if she came back to see the results of White’s own work.

She would rule this miserable dimension with an iron claw. She would satisfy all her wicked and cruel cravings, every subtle gradation of her unending bloodlust, literal just as well as metaphorical. Then, when she had had her fill, when she had grown bored of this place, she would slaughter them all!

She would keep her promise to Prince Jack. She would leave Star alone. The last mewman alive!

After that, maybe she would figure out a way to go to the place ‘Princess’ Marco and ‘Prince’ Jack had come from - some backwater called Earth, apparently - and do the same thing there. After all, she had sworn to leave all three of them alone, not just the mewman.

Princess White was a creature of the spoken tale, and she took her promises very seriously.

Chapter End Notes

Ding dong, the bitch is back!

**Note:** Jackie’s mom is inspired by, but by no means identical to, the version of her appearing in CrimsonBeagle’s Taming Princess Marco. Up to and including me blatantly stealing the line about her being “such a flower-child”.

Chapter Summary

In which Tom remembers meeting an old friend, Janna receives a troubling visit, and familiar faces are not what they first seemed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 23: Goodbyes, Hellos, and Final Warnings

The envelope lying at the edge of Tom’s desk was laden in its own formality. Unlike the unearthly void-darkness that had enclosed Sam’s accursed invitations, the stationery was crafted out of more mundane materials. Still, the black fabric, tastefully patterned with bright crimson contours, looked imposing even before the waxen family seal was applied, and would look positively forbidding afterwards.

The blood-red script atop its back side read as follows: “To: Wrathmelior Lucitor, of the line of Iblis the Elder, by the will of The Morning Star, Queen of the hells under her name. From: Thomas Lucitor, of the line of Iblis the Elder, prince of the hells under his name”. It upheld all the appearances of distance that demon decorum dictated between the young scion of a hellish domain and its ruling matriarch.

The letter that would go inside, however, would carry a much warmer tone, one that was shown often in private between the queen and her only son. Tom loved his mother, and she loved him in return. It was a relationship that might not be uncommon in mortal families, yet was not one to be taken for granted within the underworld, and perhaps, not even always in the worlds above. He had reflected upon this fact all the more these days, after what had happened to Star’s mom.

If anything, such knowledge made him feel all the more guilty that he was telling her about their plans in such an impersonal way. Unfortunately, he had no choice.

“Dear Mom,

Sorry I was not able to say goodbye in person.

As you read these words, I am on my way to the City of Dis. I am accompanying Star, and her friends.

I am sure you heard what happened to Queen Moon, and what Star decided to do about it. I am helping her with it. I know you and Moon were good friends, so I hope you will understand and wish us luck. Please, do not panic. I assure you that this is important to Star and to myself, and that I am not taking this decision lightly. I promise this is not any sort of reckless fit. Sam himself has vowed to provide us with safe passage.”

Tom let the black raven quill linger there for a moment, creating an ink blotch around that last period, before he remembered to lift it from the paper.
What he had meant to add right after, was an assurance that they would be alright somehow, that nothing bad would happen to Star or to him. He wanted to reassure Wrathmelior that they would not be hurt, neither by the thing that killed Moon, nor by Sam himself. But, well, he couldn’t bear to straight up lie to her mom.

Of course, even as it stood, that last line was a lie already. One of omission, but a lie nonetheless. Specifically, he was neglecting to inform her that the safe passage was conditional. If he did, then Wrathmelior would know, just as well as he did, that it was no safe passage at all. Hell, that was half the reason he was leaving a written letter, instead of talking to her mom in person! He knew she would tell him that this was a terrible idea, that he shouldn’t go. She would probably hold him back from following through with this trip.

Tom knew, deep down, that she would be right.

It was madness. Sam’s motives were beyond comprehension, obfuscated by layer after layer of misdirection and deceit. One might indeed, sometimes, be able to round his reasons down to ‘boredom’, and be content enough with that explanation. However, there was simply no drive within the ancient devil that could be even loosely approximated by words like ‘generosity’ or ‘kindness’. It was just not in his nature. Their hope, if any, was to prove more amusing to him alive than dead, and Tom wasn’t sure all of them could pull that off at the same time.

Of course, he did have some reason to hope that Sam was not intending to hurt him. After all, killing Tom just didn’t jive with how the lord of Dis had acted towards him in their previous encounters: mocking, tormenting, creepily forward, and, yet, somehow, protective. Sam had helped Tom in the past and, while the acts themselves might well have been trivial for the Endless Shadow, he had certainly been under no obligation to intercede on the younger demon’s behalf.

Then again, who knew what sort of games the devil might be playing in the long run...

----

It had been some time ago. Back when Tom was just a century or two past childhood. Way before he met Star. He had recently broken up with his first teenage… well, whatever it was they had! Not girlfriend, certainly. Not even a crush. Lover? Lay? Yeah, let’s go with that, his first teenage lay.

In truth, she had been the one to dump him.

That wasn’t to say that she was the one who had decided they shouldn’t be seeing each other anymore. No, that had actually been Tom alright. But she, instead, had been the one to literally dump him: from eight hundred meters up, out of her own infernal carriage, and into the middle of the Pale Wastes.

He’d been left stranded in the middle of that terribly monotonous hell dimension, an endless cold desert featuring nothing but coarse ‘sand’ made of pearly-white pulverized bone. It had been, frankly, a predictable end for their so called ‘relationship’.

They had first met at some underworld ball or another. She was a demon princess too, of a domain not much unlike Tom’s own. In the time they knew each other, she had been, well, exactly what you would expect a demon princess to be like: devious, manipulative, selfish, greedy, the works. Her outrageous behavior had been fun at times, he would grudgingly admit, but their relationship never got even close to being a healthy one. She was like rum: sweet, hot, harsh, liable to goad you into some truly bad decisions, and guaranteed to cause you a headache the day after.
In addition to that, there was the fact that you never wanted to get on her bad side. While Tom had always been prone to anger fits, and even more so back then, that girl had instead a taste for cold measured cruelty, and a vengeful heart. Case in point: bone-desert.

Tom had expected, and feared, that something like this would happen. It was one of the reasons he had waited so long to put a stop to their encounters in the first place. In the end, however, it would have been just as bad to let the situation shamble on like it had until then. His role had slowly morphed from that of an occasional accomplice in her schemes, to that of their primary victim. She relished in placing Tom in uncomfortable situations, in pushing him to do things that he found distasteful. It wasn’t that she wanted to do things despite his hesitation, it was that the more they bothered him, the more she wanted to do them. He frankly should have called quits after their second date, and definitely after the whole affair in Wallachia. But, well, he had been young, and awkward, and inexperienced, and, admittedly, horny.

Ugh. Was there ever a way to say that word and have it not be a pun when you had actual horns? Tom didn’t know of one back then, and wouldn’t know of one now, either.

Still, had the demon prince possessed a better control over his own temper in those days, he would surely have waited until they were back in his own domain before having that discussion. Instead, they had been in the middle of an unrelated argument, at her place, when he blurted that he no longer wished to see her.

Surprisingly, the demon princess had taken it well. She had graciously accepted his wishes, and offered him a ride back regardless. When Tom demurred, she had teased him about his misgivings, decrying his ‘poor opinion’ of herself. Eventually, like the sucker he was, Tom had agreed to be taken back home. They got inside her carriage, where they chatted amiably for an hour or so about the high and low points of their four and a half dates. Then, the very moment they were the furthest from any known infernal civilization, she proceeded to throw him out of the door in mid air.

Tom was thrice an idiot for not having seen that coming!

In any case, the point was that it was in the Pale Wastes where he first met the devil with the fiery blue eyes, with the marble-white skin that made the crushed bone under their feet look dully grey and dirty by comparison. The other teen, for that’s what he looked to be, had stood calmly among the dunes, seemingly unconcerned with any particular destination. He had been a mirage blue dot in the horizon hours before the young Lucitor reached the ephemeral hill on which he stood.

“Yo, Tom!” had been his first greeting, recognition carrying over in the utterance of his name, as if he already knew him well.

“Um, sorry, do I know you?” had been the demon boy’s first words to him in return.

Frankly, it had been less than polite, even accounting for the confusion. Had he known who he was dealing with, Tom would never have dared speak in such a way. But he didn’t know, and he had been tired, angry, and more than a little worried. It could have taken him years, walking, to reach the edge of that dimension. Years that he did have, of course, but that he also didn’t want to waste in what was a prime candidate for the multiverse’s blandest hellhole.

“Oh, perhaps you do, and perhaps you don’t,” Sam shrugged. “I do know of you, in any case. After all… I am an old friend of the family.”

“A friend of my mom?” Tom asked, surprised. The older devil did not confirm or deny this. In retrospect, the Lucitor prince now realized, it could be any of a dozen generations of his family that the Endless Shadow had dealt with before. At the time, he had other concerns in mind,
“Do you happen to know any fast way to get out of here?”

“Yes,” Sam acknowledged simply. “Although I mostly wonder how you got here. Mmmm… let me guess, Tom, girl trouble?”

“How do you know?” the demon prince had replied, puzzled.

The devil looked up and far away. “Well, with you, that is always a safe guess.” He then fixed his gaze back onto the purple demon. “Perhaps you ought to consider the… alternatives?” he added, with a smirk the young Lucitor prince wasn’t quite sure he was reading right.

“Look, I think you have me confused with someone else,” Tom grumbled. It was certainly his first, and hopefully his last, instance of ‘girl trouble’ like this. “Do you have a way out of this hellhole? Yes or no”

“If I do, then am I right to assume you want me to get you back home?” the devil asked.

“If you can...” Tom replied, nervously. Even back then, something about that meeting hadn’t seemed right, but any fast way out of that place beat years of wandering the dreary desert.

“I think I might be able to spot you on this one,” Sam smiled.

The devil made a scissor pantomime with his hand, moving his fingers quickly in opening and closing motions as he cut a swirling red vortex right in front of them.

Tom had never heard of anyone making a dimensional portal without proper dimensional scissors, before or after that day. “Is it safe?”

Sam stuck his own hand through, retrieving a familiar ping-pong paddle from the other end, and threw it at the younger demon. That had seemed convincing enough at the time, back before Tom knew who he was dealing with.

Only slightly unnerved, he approached the portal. “Um, uh… well, I mean… thanks…” he mumbled.

“No worries. I guess you’ll just have to owe me one, bro.” Sam shrugged.

The tone was casual, back then, almost teasing. The spoken words themselves had carried no hint of the ominous foreboding the demon prince’s recollections had later assigned them. Still, it wouldn’t be the last time he would hear a similar sentiment from his new ‘friend’.

----

That was the problem. There was always a price to any interactions with Sam. It was something the older devil himself often hinted at. The bill would be due at some point, maybe that same day, maybe some time far in the future, and, unfortunately, Tom was already running a pretty high tab.

Sam had agreed to let the five of them into Dis, but had only promised their safety conditional on them following rules of hospitality that they didn’t fully know or understand. What was the chance that he felt protective towards all five of them? Or that he cared enough about Tom’s well-being to want to keep Star, or Janna, unhurt? Not to mention the other two humans!

Sitting in the studio, finishing his letter, Tom wondered if he shouldn’t just call the entire plan off. Convince Star not to go, or get his mom to stop her. But the princess would not listen to reason, he knew that well. She was determined to avenge Queen Moon, even if she had to take on all of hell to
do so. Never mind that it was not really just a figure of speech anymore. And, where Star went, so did Marco and Jackie.

As for Janna? Well, Janna just seemed to go from hornet nest to hornet nest, kicking them as hard as she could, just to see what would happen. First, the thing with Midra’Apep’s urn, then the books, now Sam. Hell, when you got right down to it, Tom himself was perhaps the first hornet nest she had kicked. She was drawn to dangerous and dark things and, at some point, the young Lucitor knew, she was bound to run out of luck.

----

Janna sat in the lotus position in the middle of Tom’s room, floating in mid air by her own power.

That was not quite true, of course, the power came from the damned souls and the demons that inhabited Tom’s underworld. It was a huge tapestry made of bits and scraps of magical force which she had siphoned around herself to turn the air below her into an invisible hand, capable of holding her in its palm. She reminded herself of this fact. It was never good to forget where her magics came from, and thus where she could look towards to gain even more power. But, by now, sometimes, the power did feel like her own.

‘Witch’ had read her invitation, and Janna was pleased. It had felt like encouragement, like reaffirmation. It would be her role to play at Sam’s mysterious costume party and, at the same time, it felt like more than a role, more than make pretend. Witch was what she truly was, what she was becoming. At least she hoped it was so. So what if she couldn’t quite match Star? She could do things now, see things, understand things, that a month ago were literally beyond her comprehension. And yet, it did matter, despite her protests. It did matter that she was so far below Tom, below Star, below Sam.

But she new, she remembered, that her current power hadn’t always been her own, and thus, in turn, she knew she could obtain more than what she now had.

In front of her was the black envelope, empty now of its treacherous invitation. She had spent the last six hours staring at the dark material, feeling it with her new senses. Now it was well past midnight, and she was nowhere nearer to her goal than she had been when she started. She could sense Sam’s energies in the envelope, as well as something else, something dark and slow-flowing below the devil boy’s hellfire. But she could not draw from it. She could not get the magics that made the envelope to bend or reweave, to transform on her command. Try as she might, the black paper envelope remained indifferent to her will, more solid than stone, more real than reality itself.

Exasperated, Janna lifted a hand. A ball of blue flames sprouted between her fingers in an instant. At least she had gotten better at that since a week ago. She threw the fireball directly at the paper sleeve. It hit the dark envelope and blazed around it for a full minute before fading out. But when the embers finally died, the black paper was left unscratched and, she confirmed, cold to the touch.

“Yes, I wouldn’t have expected that to work, either,” spoke a low composed voice behind Janna, coming from the wall opposite to the door. It wasn’t Tom’s voice.

Startled, the troublemaker girl turned around to face the intruder. Her levitation failed her as she did. Fortunately, she was able to land on her feet.

The voice belonged to a transparent glaucous apparition of a half-lizard half-man creature in a crisp business suit and tie. It regarded Janna with a look of detached curiosity, making no movement towards her. His smile was full of translucent sharp teeth. His fiery eyes glittered with profound and uncaring intelligence. He stopped to examine his own claws, in an unhurried gesture of
refinement and disdain. It was as if he felt reluctantly obliged to give her presumably slower brain a chance to catch up with the situation.

Janna had heard enough from Star’s stories, and read enough of Marco’s private journal, to know who this was, even if the ghostly appearance was unexpected: Toffee.

She knew he was dangerous. She knew it well enough that she began drawing in power the moment she realized who she was dealing with. Lightning crackled between her fingers. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“I am afraid I have come to kill you,” the lizard monster responded, equably. “Sorry, nothing personal, really, but Star has left me no choice. If she won’t be convinced not to embark on this foolish path, then I must make sure the way itself is closed.”

Perhaps it was true that Janna did not always show the best of judgments. But, to her credit, she understood that when a smooth sociopath threatened you with murder, no matter how calmly, you didn’t exactly waste time asking why, or being incredulous. You either fled, or you cried for help, or you fought back. The apprentice witch decided to do all three at once. It was an instinct acquired from the harshness of experience, even if her conscious mind did not remember the lesson. Even if she had forgotten about her encounter with Princess White.

“Tom, help!!!” she yelled, and in the same breath she was raising her hands to defend herself.

Lightning flowed from her fingertips. It crashed through and around Toffee’s non-substance, harmlessly. The Lizard looked at her with bemusement, and with contempt. Janna turned around to run, but a flash of green fire passed her by on the side. Suddenly, the stairs going down into Tom’s room were engulfed in bright green blazes.

Terrified, she turned back towards Toffee, who walked slowly towards her. In desperation, she conjured two blue fireballs of her own and launched them at the specter, with predictable results. The ghost glided through the fire, unscathed.

“My turn,” he spoke coldly, and pointed at Janna with a single finger of his right claw.

A stream of green flames flowed from the limb, moving fast towards her, too fast to dodge, too fast to think. She could feel the magic in that emerald fire. It was a magic that felt like Star’s own, yet turned inside out in a profoundly wrong way. On reflex, without thinking, Janna cast a weak levitation spell. She focused again on the black envelope which had contained Sam’s party invitation. Instead of trying to draw power from it, she simply lifted it with her existing magics, pulling it between herself and the viridescent torrent of deadly combustion.

Toffee’s attack forked in two as it made contact with the dark object. Janna was glad her guess about the envelope’s indestructibility had proven right. The bifurcated streams hit opposite sides of Tom’s room, blowing twin holes into the thick stone walls. Quickly, Janna scurried into one of the newly formed openings, and began running through the hallway parallel to the demon prince’s chambers.

She had to flee, to hide, to find help.

“Tom!” she cried. “Damn it, Tom!! Help! Wrathmelior! Sam! Anyone! Please!”

Star. Toffee’s magic had felt like Star’s. Well, like Star’s magic if it had been taken through a blender of madness and evil, but still, it had a strong similarity with the mewman’s power. Janna took out her phone, without ever stopping running. She loaded her contact list, saw Star’s entry
there, still near the top. For a moment, her finger hovered over the call button. She felt an overwhelming irritation, a retching feeling of revulsion, a torrent of humiliation and guilt. It was a visceral sentiment, reinforced into the core of her being by a malignant power. But even so, it wasn’t enough to override her instinct for self-preservation. The phone rang. Once. Twice.

“Janna??” she heard the shocked surprise of the princess on the other end.

“This is getting tiresome,” remarked Toffee as he appeared right in front of the young witch, seemingly out of nowhere. Evidently, there was little point in running away from someone who could just teleport himself into the back of a closed room, or go through walls, or do whatever it was that the phantasm had done to get into Tom’s bedroom.

A claw caught Janna’s arm. It felt surprisingly solid. With the back of his remaining hand, Toffee threw the girl’s cellphone against the wall, before she could even say a word. It broke on impact. Smiling, the monster lifted that same hand to place it right in front of her face, and pointed an outstretched finger at her. Green flames began building up around the ghost’s arm.

Go figure, the age old cliche was true: life did flash before your eyes when you were about to die. It sort of careened away, like a movie put into an impossibly clear fast-forward. Janna discovered that she indeed regretted many things, no least of all to have neglected to say farewell to her parents.

Her relationship with her folks hadn’t always been the best, to be sure. She had told Tom that they wouldn’t care where she went, that they thought - not without reason - that she had run away from home weeks ago. But, if she was honest with herself, they probably did at least deserve some closure. Well, maybe. Then again, given how she was going to die, perhaps it was for the best that they didn’t know.

Janna closed her eyes.

“Gaaaarggh!!” she heard a roaring cry of rage. This time, it was a familiar voice.

Janna opened her eyes again to see Toffee’s ghost flying through the air, Tom’s hands around its neck, holding into the immaterial apparition with ease. Whether it was because the lizard had made himself corporeal to grab her, or because Tom, being a demon, could touch ghosts as a matter of course, she didn’t know. The demon prince’s eyes glowed bright red. All around the pair, a storm of green and crimson blazes devoured one another, vying for supremacy.

The young Lucitor began speaking a long incantation in a strange guttural tongue. Around him and the immortal monster, an array of stone pillars sprouted from the earth, tearing through the palace’s carpet and walls. Symbols glowed in bright scarlet script unto the rocks. Janna felt a confluence of terrible energies gathering around the two combatants...

“Enough!” Toffee shouted. He hit Tom with the back of his arm, throwing him flying into the air, past Janna herself. The stones that had begun to form exploded into emerald dust. “Since you insist on getting in the way, demon child, I will remove you as well. In the end, you are both equally inconsequential!"

Toffee advanced towards the two teens, his serene expression now gone, a glare of fury and maddened determination replacing it.

“IRRADIATED SHRAPNEL DEATH BLIZZARD BLAST!!” shouted yet another familiar voice from behind the troublemaker girl. A storm of emerald glass-like magic shards came flying fast right behind those words, blowing the lizard back into the opposite wall.
Janna turned around to see Star, followed by Marco and Jackie, as they all emerged from Tom’s hearse-like carriage. The princess’ face held a glare of fury and determination of her very own.

He had once held Marco prisoner, forced her to break the wand. He had impersonated her mom. He had gone after her friends, yet again. He would pay. Toffee would regret the day he crossed paths with Star Butterfly. If he was a ghost, she would find a way to send him beyond the veil. And if he wasn’t, he soon would be!

“DEVOURING HORRORS HELL SWARM!!” she cried out.

Flowing tentacles of undiluted black ichor jumped from the shadows, all around the lizard monster, a thousand eyes and mouths opening towards her victim. They began to bite, to rend, to feast.

Star felt a strange sensation after casting each spell on Toffee. As if a part of her magic was rebounding back onto her. She had felt the impacts against her magic shield when she cast the irradiated shrapnel blast, and now she could feel the scratches on her skin. But those were weak echoes, muted somehow, either by their very nature, or because of the many layers of magical defenses Star had weaved upon herself. Either way, this was not a sensation she had expected. She had never felt this type of feedback when practicing her new spells before.

In truth, both attacks were only a slight deviation from her usual spell repertoire, based on the same basic principles as a Warnicorn Stampede or a Narwhal Blast. Same principles, that is, but a different application, predicated upon different intent. It was what her spells could do, what her summons could be, when cast not with the intent to subdue or even to simply win, but with the desire to kill, to hurt, to destroy her foes down to their very core. A less childish spell, for far less childish purposes.

Yet, it still wasn’t enough. She could already see Toffee’s ghost recovering from the assault, getting ready to counter-attack. She would not give him such opportunity. Screw taking those risks, and screw playing fair.

“So I call on time to flow like tar,” she intoned. All around her, the flames paused their ceaseless dance, freezing in place. Time slowed down to a crawl. She calmly walked amidst a world nearly, but not entirely, stopped.

It wasn’t the same spell she had used during Jackie’s duel with Princess White. The enchantment back then had been ‘Cozy flowsy, time slowsy’, if she remembered correctly. But this was a variation of that spell, reconstructed under the principles of Eclipsa’s notes. It had been Star’s second attempt at crafting true dark magic of her own. Time was a fragile thing, after all, and, in a way, this kind of magic offered a much improved degree of control than her past attempts. It came with a more intimate understanding of the natural order she was subverting.

As for her first attempt at a dark spell...

“Seething poison, burning bright, I draw you forth with all my might,” she begun, taking aim. It was not worth using Eclipsa’s original spell just yet, not when she had the perfect opportunity to try the finished version of her earliest dark spell. It was the same blast she had used once on Tom by accident, drawing from her anger after she couldn’t deal with Marco and Jackie at the Love Sentence concert. What she had felt back then had been but a cute baby temper tantrum compared to the ire she felt towards Toffee now. “To cinder burn all in your path... unleashed storm of righteous wrath!!”
The frozen green and red flames shattered into nothing as a maelstrom of pure black bile sprouted from Star’s wand, a bright green lance of light at its core. It wasn’t quite the death spell, the darkest spell of Moon the Undaunted, but it would be enough. Toffee would find his final end, frozen in time, pierced by her well-deserved fury, as he should have since the day they first met. Star actually smiled. It felt surprisingly like the right thing to do.

The spell impacted its target and a blinding flash dissolved the world around the mewman. When the princess finally adjusted to the brightness, she saw movement on the other end of a huge curtain of smoke. Impossible. Truly and absolutely impossible. Toffee could not have survived that attack, even if he had managed to resist the original barrage. Granting even that he still existed, how could he walk towards her, when time itself had slowed to one millionth of its usual speed? Impossible! And yet, it was so.

“Are you done?” the lizard asked, in a chillingly unperturbed voice.

The shock was big enough that she failed to maintain the time spell, and the rest of the world around them resumed moving as well. Walls crumbled under impacts that had already happened but that the stone itself was just now feeling. Decorations burned under flames that had long passed them by. Her ears thundered with the sonic boom of her earlier wrathful spell. All the while, Star felt herself at a loss for an explanation on what she had seen the monster do. Nothing should have been able to move back there, except for herself and her spells.

“You...” The princess tried to compose her thoughts, unsuccessfully. Realization slowly swept in, through her anger and surprise. “You can’t be Toffee either. You just can’t be. Who... What are you?!”

Before her eyes, Toffee’s ghost dissolved. Instead of him, there was now Glossaryck’s phantasm, regarding her with disappointment.

“Well, you know, I sort of thought you might have figured it out by now. I am...”

It changed form. Glossaryck was gone. In its place stood Hekapoo.

“Fierce,”

Another switch, and Moon stood again in front of Star. A heartbreaking mirage.

“Undaunted,”

The next instant it was Toffee once more, grinning cruelly.

“Relentless,”

It kept that form then, but the voice changed. It became a female voice, one that spoke like a chorus of many voices, all beautiful and all terrifying.

“I am will, unbending.”

Star shivered. Her eyes opened wide. She remembered what her dad had said, about the night her mom died. The creature that had done it had said something very similar back then. ‘I am love, all-conquering’. And Star knew, she knew it was the same being. She knew her journey was at an end before it ever truly started. All the better that way. Beyond terror, beyond anger, beyond shock, she raised her wand and aimed true, straight for the heart, just like she had practiced.

“I call the darkness unto me, from deepest depths of earth and sea, from ancient evils unawoken, to
break the one who can’t be broken,” she recited, as fast as she could. “To blackest night I pledge my soul, and crush my heart to burning coal, to summon forth the deathly power, to-see-my-hated-foe...”

“Sweetie? What are you doing?” spoke Moon, just as the princess prepared to say the last word of the death spell.

Star knew it was fake. She knew the creature she was seeing was not her mom. That it was the thing that killed her. It should have incensed her rage to see such a cowardly display, such a crude deception. It should have multiplied her hate for this thing a thousandfold. It did. And yet, she couldn’t do it. She was unable to complete the spell. Her hand veered to the side, and the thin ray of perfect blackness hit the stone instead, drilling a hole through it.

A blast of green flames hit Star in retaliation. Her shields shattered and her body flew backwards, thrown aside like a discarded rag doll.

----

It took Jackie a shamefully long time to catch up with what had just happened, to even begin opening the zipper of her duffel bag. A mere hour ago, she would have called her own duel with Princess White intense. It had been child’s play by comparison. Star had unleashed levels of ass-kicking on the green phantasm that the skateboarder girl wouldn’t have believed possible, had she not seen her in action. Yet, not five minutes after they arrived, the princess laid on the floor, surrounded by emerald flames, unconscious.

The human girl pulled out her sword from the bag, and steeled herself for one brave - and foolish - act of defiance. It was no flimsy fencing foil she had packed for the journey, but a real blade. As real as she could find. Forged by some medieval weapons enthusiast back in L.A. She had made sure to procure such a weapon as soon as they returned from St O’s. She hadn’t known why, at the time, since it seemed future dimensional adventures would be shelved indefinitely as Star dealt with the fallout from her mom’s death. But there was something about her duel with Princess White that made Jackie want to have a true sword of her own. It had cost her many months of her own savings, but it was the real deal: sturdy and sharp, not a dull thing made to exhibit as decoration. She had tested it.

Even so, it was a far cry from the enchanted golden sword she had used in her duel with the vampire princess. She herself was not nearly as strong, nor as quick, as she had been under the influence of Star’s magics. Without the added power, the girl could barely hold up the blade. She had no hope of fighting off this foe, this abomination that wore the face of Queen Moon. But she had to do something. Star and Tom were out cold, Janna was in a panic, and Marco was just as weak as she was, when it came right down to it. Perhaps, if only she could hold off their enemy for a few seconds, not much more than an instant, it might be enough for the mewman girl to regain consciousness, or for the rest of them to run away.

“Aaa-yaaa!” Jackie Lynn Thomas charged, sword in hand, channeling as much of ‘Prince Jack’ as she could muster.

“Oh, for corn’s sake,” spoke the thing that wasn’t Star’s mom. A green spectral blade appeared in its hand, and it moved to effortlessly parry the human girl’s strike.

The true blade, the one forged from hard steel, broke in two as it made contact with the edge of the ghostly weapon. A shower of sparks flowed around Jackie’s hair. The hilt heated to a burning red, and she was forced to let go of it, yelping in pain. The emerald apparition fixed her a look of utter contempt, as the former queen kicked her in the stomach.
Jackie knew then that, if it had wanted, her opponent could have easily punched a hole through her abdomen with its leg. As it was, it pushed her back and onto the ground, knocking out all of the air inside her. She opened her mouth to yell in pain. She vomited instead. She hadn’t bought them a single second.

Out of the corner of her eye, the girl saw Marco glance briefly at her. Was his look one of concern? Or was it pity? Either way, her boyfriend’s eyes didn’t linger. He turned his back to her, and began walking towards the many-faced monstrosity. All of Jackie’s pain faded away, overwhelmed by the terror that he might try to fight the creature too... and die.

----

As he approached the creature, Moon’s visage twisted and changed. Instead, it was Hekapoo’s face which now regarded Marco with a dismissive smirk. “What is it, kiddo? You want to fight me too? Because you are even dumber than I thought you were if you really think you have a chance.”

’Give me sixteen years’, thought Marco. ‘Sixteen years and then let’s see who doesn’t have a chance’. But he knew the apparition was right. His body was weak, the only ritual he could remember was useless in combat and, even if it had been possible for him to fight now like he could at the end of Hekapoo’s scissor quest... Well, even then, this wasn’t Hekapoo. It was the thing that had managed to do her in.

“So, here is what I don’t understand,” he tried to buy time. Pretending a confidence that he had only really felt in dreams. “You are supposed to be trapped, no? Sealed away. What happened with that? And, if you are here, then where is Hekapoo?!’

’A ritual of sealing, for a power greater than myself,’ had said the sorceress in his dream. Then how come this creature, whatever it was, walked free? It didn’t work that way. It couldn’t work that way. Every ritual had a price, but what you bought with it also had to be of fair value. There was just no way, no way at all, for Hekapoo’s sacrifice to have been worth so little. Marco didn’t care how great a power they were talking about, nothing could walk free mere days after a trade like that!

“I am dead, muscles,” she mocked him. “Gone. Undone. Laid low. Turned to dust. But it is true I did seal away most of it. Most of me.”

The voice had started as Hekapoo’s, but turned into a chorus of different voices for just the last three words. When the ghost spoke once more, after that, it used the voice of the forger of scissors once again.

“‘Every echo I send out, allows it one of its own, of proportional magnitude,’” she quoted the real Hekapoo. Her tone was ice cold, her manner smug and sardonic. “An aspect for an aspect, kid. A dream... for a nightmare.”

With that last utterance, two pairs of dimensional scissors appeared in the specter’s hands. With a swift movement, she raced past Marco’s slow form, and opened a portal right behind him with one of them.

“You are lucky I don’t want to kill the three of you, kid,” spoke the false Hekapoo as she pushed the human boy through the dimensional gateway. “Honestly, you all should be thanking me!”

Marco saw the world in front of him fade as he made it through the swirling opening. He didn’t know what place laid at the other end, but it didn’t matter, it was not where he had to be. It was taking it away from his friends, who needed him, away from Star.
A second later, just as he was bracing for whatever he would find on the other end, he saw the previous scene return, as a force yanked him out of the portal. The pull sent him sprawling out onto the floor of Tom’s castle. He looked up to see Janna’s outstretched hand, glowing blue, far away from him.

“Ooops, Marco, sorry for the landing,” she smiled, clearly not all that sorry. “Guess I am still new at this stuff.”

That was an underatement. Since when could Janna levitate stuff?

“Clearly. And I am afraid you will not live to turn pro,” spoke Toffee, as the ghostly being switched masks once more. “You see, unlike those two, I really do not mind ending you, girl. So let’s finish what I came here to do. Shall we?”

----

“No,” spoke Tom dangerously. Anger didn’t even begin to describe the fire that burned inside of him now. This thing had hurt Star, had intruded into his home, had wounded him, and now, it was threatening the human girl, again. “No, we shall not.”

His eyes glowed like blazing calderas. Flame and lightning danced all around him. Through harsh pain and numbing fear, the Lucitor prince rose up a second time. He flew up high into the air, and the entirety of the underworld under his domain became quiet as his fundamental void begun calling all of demonkind to his aid.

“Am I supposed to be scared?” retorted Toffee, unimpressed.

“Oh, terrified,” Tom assured him in a grave guttural voice. He began chanting in the ancient tongue, summoning all the damned under his rule, beseeching demons and dead souls alike.

He could see, in Janna’s face, that she was the first to perceive it for what it was, to understand the energies he was gathering. She looked impressed, awed, and more than a bit jealous. Oh, for fuck sake! He was saving her life, she better deal with the fact he could do things she couldn’t.

The green phantasm lifted a claw towards him, a blur of flames shimmering right under the surface. In an instant, a sturdy metal chain came spilling out of the ground and grabbed the offending appendage. Then came another, and another after that. Fetters and shackles of iron black as night closed themselves around the monster. It trashed and burned, it assaulted the restrains with unearthly power, and yet they held. A circle of red flames began drawing itself around the intruder’s form, a circle broken by twelve equidistant spikes: Arus’Morgáth, the sigil of domain.

Marco gasped. Jackie looked up, still too shocked, and perhaps too much in pain, to speak. They both beheld what the demon prince knew were the full limits of his power. He would have to remember to rub this one on Marco’s face later. But for now, he needed to remain focused.

“You should be afraid,” Tom repeated, “because I am Tom Lucitor, son of Wrathmelior Lucitor, descendant of Iblis Lucitor the Elder, and heir of their line. You should be afraid, because you are in the underworld under my rule, on the domain left to me by my ancestors, and given to them by The Morning Star Himself!”

He had never done this before, never needed to. This thing, whatever it was, was more powerful than him, more powerful than even Star. Yet, within his domain, Tom could call unto powers far beyond his own. He could bend the entirety of this place to his call. Every demon and every spirit, of the underworld of Mewni and Earth and a dozen more dimensions, ultimately answered to him.
and his family. The creature before them was weakened, merely an echo of whatever it used to be. It had admitted that much to Marco. There was no way that it would be able to stand, on its own, against literally all the powers of hell! Of his hell, at least.

“By right of domain, by ancient pacts and even older laws, I order you to withdraw from my lands!” he shouted. “Or else be cast to the flame beneath the flame!”

A crimson glow began flowing through the huge dark chains. The twelve pointed circle shone blinding in mid air around the emerald phantom, as a whirlpool of invisible demonic spirits began bearing down on it. Lightning and flame assaulted the translucent monstrosity in lizard form. It grunted in pain and frustration.


Just like that, the forces of the underworld ceased their attack, and Tom could not have forced them to continue if he tried to. Whatever this being was, it knew the rules at least as well as Tom himself did. He had told it to go away and, if it did, of its own free will, then the demon prince had no authority to deny that. Not under the right of domain. He could still use his own personal magics to try and harm the creature, of course, but that did not seem wise.

“But hear me out, as I depart, all of you,” Toffee spoke, keeping the voice, if perhaps not the persona. “If you stay down here, you are safe from me. If you go back to Earth or to Mewni, if you desist from seeking me out, then too I promise I’ll leave you in peace there as well. But if you persist on this course, then we will meet again, and it will be far away from your domain, young Lucitor. Remember as well, that this is not nearly the fullness of my power. Star, Marco, Jackie, I truly do not desire your deaths. They would inconvenience me. But make no mistake, I’ll accept them, if given no choice. Goodbye.”

With a thunderous boom and an explosion of green flames, the emerald ghost vanished.

Tom felt the last bit of strength drain away from him. He had never done this before. Never commanded all of the hell under his domain at once. Even his mother did so rarely. It had taken his all to retain such control until now. He fell to the ground from meters up in the air, his own flames extinguished for a time. He fell into the arms of a recently awoken Star Butterfly.

“Tom, that was...” the princess spoke. He could barely hear her, his consciousness fading. It was not death, nothing like that, only exhaustion. He smiled at her.

“I am so glad you are alright, Starship,” he whispered as his eyes closed, right before everything around him turned to black.

Chapter End Notes

As dark as this chapter may have been, I should point out this is the first time our villain makes an appearance and there is not a body count. Of course, it is not the original form of our villain either, though.

For those wondering if this version of ghost!Toffee was the plan all along, I invite you to look at Chapter 17, First Comment, Secret #3, Password: gentlemenitsbeenapleasure ;)

Chapter End Notes
Coming up next: Chapter 23: I Call the Darkness Unto Me
I Call the Darkness Unto Me

Chapter Summary

In we get conversations between mismatched pairs, costumes are worn, and we begin our descent into hell.

Chapter Notes

All warnings, tags, and disclaimers, apply in full force for this and the following three chapters. If things so far in IStASE have made you uncomfortable, this is where you might wish to step out of this ride.

With that said... we are off to see the wizard, the magical wizard from hell...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 24: I Call the Darkness Unto Me

Tom woke up to what many would consider the best possible thing after an ordeal like that: the sight of a pretty girl. Except it wasn’t the one he had expected. Nor was she the one he had hoped for, either. He blinked, confused. His head ached way too much for him to quite process what he was seeing.

“Hey,” Jackie greeted the waking demon. “How you feeling, dude?”

“I am...” he began. In tremendous pain, was how he was, truth be told. But, instead of saying so, he simply asked, “...where am I?”

She didn’t need to answer. As he looked around, he realized he was sleeping on a familiar couch, in the back of his own personal carriage. He could feel the gentle vibrations that indicated they were in motion. The undead horse pulled them forward, galloping through the dimensions, fast as a comet and gentle as a gliding shadow.

“We are on our way already,” Jackie explained. “We’ve been traveling for a while, actually. Janna said we would not make it in time unless we took off this morning.”

Tom sighed. Of course. After all, he had been the one who spent the previous day reminding the witch that they could not afford to be late to their meeting with Sam. He was the one who had explained how that meant they had to leave early that next morning, no matter what.

Wait! That morning? It had been middle of the night when he fought the abomination, which meant... “What time is it now? How long was I out?!”

Jackie looked at her phone. “Well, I am not sure how timezones work in hell, but, on Earth, it would be 4pm, pacific time. You have been out slightly over twelve hours, dude. You really must have overexerted yourself pretty badly back there...“
Twelve hours?! His eyes glowed red with fury at the realization. He tried to feel the environment around them, the hell within his domain. He failed. They were already past the threshold, far outside his lands. He couldn’t protect them here if the monstrosity showed up again. He flared up in anger and fear. “No! We need to go back! Turn us back this instant, girl!”

Jackie leaned back, ever so slightly, as flames burst out around Tom’s prone form. After the momentary surprise passed, she simply looked at him and gently shook her head, “We are almost there already, Tom. Anyways, I don’t see us turning back. Star won’t have it, and where she goes, I guess we go…”

Almost there? He closed his eyes, and felt it. It permeated the air around them, the earth beneath them, the firmament high above: Sam’s power. They were already within his lands, already well inside the confines of his own domain. Tom calmed down ever so slightly. Sam had promised his protection, conditional as it was. While in his realm, nothing else would have them for prey, not even the creature from last night. For now, the risk was just the devil he knew. Literally.

It occurred to Tom at that point, that he had never interacted much with Marco’s human girlfriend. Sure, he had argued with her, or rather at her, back in St O’s. But that had been brief. Star was missing then, and he had to find her, to undo the human teens’ stupidity. He had mostly dealt with Marco then, not the girl. But here she was, this Jackie kid, calmly telling him no, even as he had blazed fury, even after what she had just seen him do.

“You are not afraid of me?” Tom asked, surprised.

“Well, Marco isn’t, and Star isn’t, and I don’t think Janna is, either,” she reasoned, shrugging as she counted with her fingers. “Whatever eye-glow exploding thing you have going on, dude, you seem to have it under control when it really counts. So, as long as I know you don’t actually want to hurt me…”

She looked pensive for a moment. She stared down, avoiding his eyes, all three of them.

“Besides, I think I have proved I don’t have enough good sense in me to be afraid, even when I should be,” she spoke dejectedly. Suddenly, she seemed a lot less self-assured than she had so far.

Tom was confused at first. Then he remembered her charging at the fiery apparition, which had taken the form of none less than Moon the Undaunted, while brandishing some flimsy Earth-sword. That had taken balls, he had to admit. He chuckled at the irony.

“Well,” he smiled, finally, “you are in good company. You humans all seem to have a death wish.”

He laughed, in a way he hoped was just perhaps a smidgen more friendly than it was derisive.

“Hey! You are one to talk!” she chided him, and punched him playfully in the arm. “What you did was badass, dude. I won’t say it wasn’t. But when you fell down, at the end… we all thought... I mean, I think even Star was afraid. She looked like she was about to cry…”

Tom blinked. Star? Star had been about to cry? Over him? No way! Jackie must be making it up. Or maybe misinterpreting the mewman somehow. It had barely gotten to the point where she tolerated him, after all. And given everything he had done to her in the past, even that much was nearly a miracle. Besides, if she truly cared, she would be here now, wouldn’t she?

“By the way, where is Star?” he asked. “Or Janna? Or Marco? Why are you here, of all people?”

That came out a lot more rude than he had intended. Fortunately for him, Jackie seemingly took no offense.
“Janna and Marco are driving. Apparently he is the only one of us with any experience taking this thing for a ride, and Janna is the only one of us who can read a map of hell,” she explained. “Star is busy brooding up there.”

She pointed at the ceiling above them.

“Star... brooding?” he repeated dumbly. It is not like he didn’t know what the princess was going through, or how much it had affected her. Hell, he had seen the hurt and fury in her eyes last night as she fought, however briefly. Still, knowing Star as long as he did, the thought of her sulking simply did not fit his picture of the mewman princess. If anything, it was he that used to do that, even back when they were dating and he had few excuses for unhappiness.

“I don’t think she wants to be with anyone right now. She got into another spat with Janna and has been sitting on the roof ever since,” Jackie continued, paying no mind to his confusion. “As for why me? Well, your girlfriend wanted someone to keep watch over you, and she asked me to do it.”

“My girlfriend?” he asked. Then it clicked. “Janna is not...”

Jackie raised an eyebrow. Tom stopped mid-sentence.

“I don’t know what we are, ok?!” he spat, irritably.

“Fair enough, dude,” Jackie shrugged. “... just make sure she knows that. Anyways, we should probably tell them that you are back in the land of the living.”

Tom sensed the endless currents of dead souls that flowed through the vastness of Sam’s domain. ‘The land of the living’? It was anything but.

“Sure,” he answered, getting up.

----

Guiding Tom’s hearse through the depths of the underworld was certainly a unique experience. It was not at all like riding it from one dimension to another, where the entire ride seemed as if the horse and carriage were gliding through an infinite sea of flame, with no geography of its own. It was also not like riding it on Earth, where its slow movement seemed almost mundane by comparison. Down here, the scene around them moved way too fast for how a normal horse would gallop. Yet, Marco, holding the reins through the coach’s front window, didn’t feel the flow of air against his face that their velocity would imply, nor the bumpiness of the harsh rock terrain below them. Hell, Star was sitting atop the damn thing now, and apparently she had no complaints, at least none about their movement.

“So, what’s going on between you and Star?” he ventured asking to the girl besides him.

“What’s going on between you and Star?” Janna echoed the question back to him. Without looking away from the scene above them.

It was majestic, in a horrifying sort of way. Where Earth of Mewni would have blue skies or, at night, a tapestry of constellations, Sam’s hell had a permanent blue aurora over its entire firmament. A blue aurora that, Janna had assured the boy, was made of mind-bogglingly huge streams of souls, all flowing towards a gaping void in the center of its celestial vault. Right below that void, said Tom’s maps, was a huge black fortress; inside that, a city; and inside that, Sam’s palace. The land was no less eerie than the sky, with narrow bridges, hundreds of miles long, twisting and turning over an ocean-sized chasm. A faint red glow shone from below the bottomless
abyss. Every so often, a huge black spike of rock rose from the depths, higher than the bridge they were in: a wicked torn stabbing the air towards the heavens. Or, perhaps, towards the mortal worlds above this hell.

“Me and Star?” Marco asked. In the back of his mind, he hoped the troublesome girl had been reading the maps right. This would be a terrible place to get lost in, even with the finding ritual at hand as their last resort. “You are the one who almost got into a fist fight with her just now, Janna! Star and I are fine.”

“Sure you are,” she said, sarcastically.

“Ok, so, maybe it freaks me out a little bit that she seems to be getting more and more, well, maybe, forceful is the word? Like, the stuff she did back there. I mean, the situation definitely warranted it. That shape-shifting thing is going to give me nightmares for weeks! It’s just, well, I have never seen Star be so... vicious?” he hesitated. “I just don’t know how to keep her from being too far gone, you know? I can’t imagine what she is going through, and I am not going to tell her how to deal with what happened to her mom. How could I? But, sometimes, I wish the old Star were back, that I knew how to bring her back. I worry if there is anything left of her. And well, it is super dumb that I am still worried about this too, but there is the thing with the spying spell, and how Star and Jackie haven’t really talked since then. Also, I think I hurt Jackie, like really badly, even though she is being incredibly chill about it, and... why am I telling you all of this?”

“No idea,” Janna shrugged.

They rode in silence for some time after that.

A huge thing that looked somewhat like a rose and somewhat like an octopus, passed flying above them. Its main body was a black bulb of amorphous ‘petals’, of a bright purple color. That form alone was the size of Echo Creek’s cafeteria building. Attached to it was a mass of black tentacles, thick as sewer mains, each of them full of eyes and mouths. It screamed a piercing hunger-filled scream through ten thousand maws. For some reason, it reminded Marco of something, of someone. He knew that they should have been more afraid than they felt. But, honestly, they had been seeing things like that all day. They always passed by and left them alone. When asked about that, Janna had reminded him that they had all been invited, and that Sam had promised no harm would come to them if they didn’t fuck things up. Her words, not his.

Marco wondered a bit about Janna. About how comfortable she was with all of this. The girl had always been fascinated by the morbid and creepy, but this was different. She had spent weeks living with Tom in the underworld, immersing herself in the lore, learning who knows what dark magical powers. Hell, it was hard enough coming to terms with the fact that Janna had real magical powers! It was one thing for Marco to see Star casting magic, or Tom throwing fireballs around, another to see Janna shoot lightning from her hands.

Then again, he had magic of his own. He knew the ritual of finding, and also knew that there were many more where that had come from. Marco knew that, once, back in Hekapoo’s dimension, he had mastered dozens of powerful magical rituals, maybe more. He vaguely felt he could do things that would have given even Star a run for her money. After all, it had been enough to level the playing field with Hekapoo. But now? All he could do was find things, and whatever he found cost him a memory. He still didn’t even know what he had forgotten, back when he used it to find a way in Tom’s maps room. He hoped it hadn’t been something important.

Maybe, maybe he could use that ritual to find the others, the memories he was missing. After all, if the ritual could find a place, or a person, why not a memory? It certainly could take them from him. He took a deep breath. It was worth a shot. He couldn’t afford to keep being the most useless
of the five of them. At least Jackie knew how to use a weapon. A red belt in karate was just not
going to cut it for this. The problem was, how to name a memory? Perhaps...

He closed his eyes, lifted his closed fist to his mouth, muttered the words and exhaled. The tip of
his finger shone bright with golden light. In the back of his mind, he knew this was a bad idea.
There was something dangerous about attempting rituals using vague and hopeful wording, and
what he was asking for was as vague as could be. He traced the first glyph, rough and sharp, drawn
in a single curving pattern along the air.

“What is that?” Janna asked, curious. Marco grinned at her, happy he could also still surprise the
witch as well.

“Strength,” he translated. He had asked to find strength. He didn’t know the glyphs for spell, or
ritual.

He continued drawing in mid air, a light glyph that curled intricately around the previous one,
delicate and ephemeral. “And this one is ‘thought’, or ‘memory’. I am trying to find something... to
remember something I forgot. A sealed memory is what Hekapoo called it.”

“A sealed memory?” Janna muttered pensive. Her face turned into a frown, as if she were trying to
recall something herself.

Marco’s drawing shone brighter and folded unto itself, turning into a small sphere, a transparent
flake of light. It flew towards him, to the middle of his forehead, and buried itself into his skull. He
felt no different. Was the spell telling him that the strength was in him all along? That was nice and
all, kinda poetic, but, well, also terribly useless! Or was it just saying: ‘Hey you lazy idiot, you
have these memories inside you already. That you don’t remember is not my fucking problem!’

Marco felt that was a weird way for him to phrase it, actually, even in his mind. It didn’t sound like
his own thoughts. It sounded like what someone else would say, someone Marco knew well. But
who? Try as he might, he couldn’t remember. Hekapoo? No, that wasn’t quite right either...

His thoughts were interrupted as Janna raised her hand in front of him, fingers poised at the ready.
She snapped them, and a ball of blue flames suddenly flared into existence in mid air, right in front
of Marco’s face. It caused the boy to back away in surprise from the heat and to almost let go of
the reins. “What was that for!?” he protested.

As the fireball burned itself away into nothingness, the girl gave Marco the smuggest look he had
ever seen on her face. That was saying quite a bit, actually, since there had been plenty in the past
to benchmark against. She shrugged at his question.

“Hey, nice one, Janna,” came a familiar male voice and a chuckle behind the two of them. Marco
turned around to see Tom and Jackie walking into the driver compartment.

“Hey Marco, missed me?” Jackie joked. He, in fact, had.

Tom’s amused smile fell at that moment, just as soon as he looked out of the window.

“Belial and Belphegor!” he swore. “We are here...”

Marco looked back towards the front of the hearse and saw what the fiend meant. It was perhaps a
hundred thousand meters away still, as the tentacled-monstrosity flies, and probably a lot further
through the labyrinthine bridges of hell. But the fast-moving carriage would cross that span in just
a handful more minutes. At the distance, he could see a humongous citadel, almost more a
mountain that an edifice. On the corners, twelve enormous towers rose towards the sky, each
ending in a claw-like crown of five spikes. It looked almost as if those were twelve titanic hands, holding up the dark hole at the center of this world’s heavens.

Just as Marco was about to comment on the sight before him, he felt a jolt in his stomach, and the sight was no longer there. Nor the carriage. Nor the sky.

----

“Ah, just in time!” a bemused voice exclaimed. Star scrambled to find its source, to figure out her new surroundings, to get ready to strike back at whatever had yanked her from the top of Tom’s hearse and deposited her here. But, where was ‘here’, exactly?

It looked like a gigantic foyer, one that reminded the princess of the throne room of Butterfly Castle. It was, in fact, eerily similar. The same minaret windows, the same diamond patterns, the blue banners. Oh god! It looked just like the place her mom had died in.

She had avoided that room the whole time she had been back in Mewni, opting to give speeches in public squares and conduct more private government business in the council chambers. As soon as she was able, she had delegated all hearings in the throne room back to her dad. She felt sick, about to vomit, and not just because of the disorienting teleportation.

Except it wasn’t actually Mewni’s throne room. It was wrong in too many ways to be the real thing. The windows showed the hellish soul-river sky she had been watching before. The banners had a flaming sword surrounded by a twelve pointed circle, instead of any of the heraldry symbols more common in Mewni. The statues showed grotesque cyclopean creatures instead of famous historical mewmans. Most importantly, instead of two thrones, there was a single statue of an obsidian clawed hand, rising up from the floor. Languidly sprawled along its palm, lied a young man of marble-white skin, glowing golden hair, and blinding blue eyes.

“Hope you like the look, princess Star,” Sam spoke equably. “I redecorated, in honor of my esteemed guests. Please, make yourselves… at home.”

Star glared at the devil, and it took all of her self-control to not point her wand at him. Instead, she took a deep breath. When the princess spoke, her voice was a polite but cold monotone: “Thank you for the invitation, lord Sam, and for being such a gracious host. I assure you I wish nothing more than to be able to return such politeness in kind and in the exact same spirit it was given…“

The three humans looked at her dumbfounded. Even Tom seemed somewhat surprised, although he gave her thumbs up behind his own back.

‘Geez’, Star thought. They could give her a bit more credit! Sure, diplomacy wasn’t like her strongest suit ever, but it was not like she didn’t see what this asshole was trying to provoke her into doing. They were safe as long as they didn’t ‘violate his hospitality’, whatever that meant. If this passive aggressive bullshit was how he wanted to play it, then Star would oblige.

“Excellently spoken,” Sam responded, not bothering to conceal his amusement. “I would assume, of course, that a guest as polite as yourself would have brought some suitable gift for their humble host?”

Fuck, that was some Miss Heinous level of protocol horseshit! Star saw the horror dawning in Tom’s eyes. They had, of course, not had time to pack any presents. Not that she seriously believed they could have brought anything Sam wanted. It was just his next move in whatever sick game he was playing. It was also a completely different behavior than the one Janna had described to her before. But the girl had also warned Star that Sam changed attitude like a snake changes skins.
Either way, this had an easy fix. Star smiled back at the devil and slowly raised her wand, pointing it calmly to the space between the two, making sure there was no way in here it could be misinterpreted as an act of aggression. She closed her eyes and dipped down. She didn’t know a spell for this occasion, but that didn’t really matter when you did things the hard way, when you took the time to get to the chunks. With a thought, she summoned forth a huge treasure chest, filled with gold, fine silks, diamonds, and, most importantly, corn. It was much easier than recreating her entire room anyways.

“A sample of traditional mewnian crafts and goods,” she announced with a curtsy. She refrained from adding up where she thought Sam could stick all of that corn.

“A kind gift, and an even kinder sentiment,” Sam remarked with a nod. Star got an eerie feeling from his tone, almost as if he could read her previous thought and was replying to it as well. Either way, he was openly grinning now. “Sorry for the abruptness in getting you here, by the way. I do not believe a visit to the slums of the city below would have been pleasant for any of you, or particularly entertaining for myself. I could always be convinced otherwise, of course.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Tom interrupted, relieving Star from having to come up with a witty response to the implied threat. She looked down through the windows then, to the smoke filled labyrinth of alleys and cavernous dwellings of the city of Dis. Sam’s castle, apparently, literally floated in the middle of the city, a thousand paces above the ground. The demon prince continued, “I just hope my carriage and horse are being taken good care of?”

“Ah, don’t you worry about that, bro,” Sam responded, effusively, yet evasively. As he regarded Tom, his eyes were not glowing anymore, and his expression had become almost witless compared to his earlier show of devious flair. “You should just relax and enjoy the party. Let your old pal Sam here take care of the dets, man!”

If anything, Star liked his previous mask better. Easier to know where they stood with that one.

Once again, as if he could tell what she was thinking, Sam’s eyes lit up in harsh blue light as he turned back to her. “Now, I do believe you all brought your invitations. So how about we get you all more comfortable?” he asked.

It was clearly a rhetorical question since, that very same instant, five pieces of black paper came flying out of the teens’ pockets and bags, coming up to float right above their heads. The invitations exploded into a shower of ashen confetti atop each of them. As the flakes fell on Star, she felt her bright green dress lengthening and changing into a dark purple gown. The cartoon octopus in the middle transmuted itself into a large silver blooming rose. Long thorn-covered ivy-like vines extended out from the flower and through all of the dress fabric in an intricate pattern. Her purple plastic boots turned black and velvet, with sizable heels sprouting from their soles. Her stockings lost the striped pattern. They became entirely black and dangerously sheer, if not for the added length of the outfit’s skirt. Her horned diadem remained, but turned into pure shining silver. Her cheekmarks themselves turned into mauve colored closed rosebuds.

Yes, Star thought, so much better this way. She felt elegant, she felt wicked, she felt above it all. The countess. She could work with that. She understood this was more than a costume. Maybe, if she had never read Eclipsa’s notes, she wouldn’t have gotten it so quickly. It wasn’t that the disguise controlled her, that it overrode her own personality or thoughts, nothing quite so crude. But there were additional instincts, additional sensations, additional feelings that came with the role. Star liked those feelings. They resonated with her current state of mind, powerfully and insidiously. This was how she could tell this was going to be more dangerous than she initially thought. It was easier to resist a compulsion you found hateful, rather than one you found pleasant,
or so had Eclipsa’s little book of mischief warned (and advised) her.

She looked around, at the others. Marco was, well, he was *hot*. The champion. It sort of reminded her of older Marco, but it wasn’t quite that. His body hadn’t changed from his almost 15 year old self, and the outfit was very different from the one he ended up wearing in Hekapoo’s dimension, even if it shared a certain harsh aesthetic. He was clad in brown leather, which covered only his torso and upper legs, leaving his strong arms bare. He had a red bandanna around his head. A makeshift suit of armor covered his chest and abdomen, made of iron plates strewn together with leather straps. It was a scratched dented ugly thing, and Star loved it! The safe kid had never looked this dangerous. Hell, Sam had given him a double edged iron sword to match. Primitive by mewman standards, it resembled those weapons from her history classes back on Earth, from a place called Rome, or sometimes Greece. Those were the same, right? Star was never great at Earth history. Either way, Marco looked badass!

Tom also ended up looking rather dashing, in a very different way. ’The scoundrel!’ indeed. He was dressed in thin black silky fabric for the upper half, with a V neck that reached well below the middle of his well-toned yet lean chest. The lower half was a very tight-fitting set of long leather pants. His hands were sprinkled by a series of rather interesting silver rings. He wore black and smooth leather boots. Star realized that Sam had given him a rose tattoo on the neck, and another one near his upper abdomen, whose shape she couldn’t quite see fully under even the low collar of his shirt. His usual earring had been replaced by a silver one shaped into a sapphire-eyed skull.

Janna had said Sam liked men. Seeing the costume choices, Star had to believe that was true. The troublemaker herself, by contrast, was dressed in a plain black hooded robe, with a pentagram etched in what looked to be blood through the back of it. Knowing Janna, she would love it. But to the mewman princess, that was really, well, ’meh’. And Jackie… oh wow, and not the good kind!

Jackie was dressed in brown rags. Her usually carefully tousled hair was messed up to hell and plastered together into grimy clumps. Her face was covered in dirt. Along her wrists were two very solid metal shackles, tied together by a short chain. Same thing around her feet, to the point she would need to shuffle more than walk. A lot of her was exposed through the old broken-down fabric, and yet, it wasn’t an alluring look. This was the harsh vulnerable kind of exposed, not the playful kind. Mostly, Jackie looked miserable, and weak. Her expression looked shocked and pained, and so very lost, probably courtesy of those extra ’instincts’ that came with her costume. The Slave. Star glared at Sam, and noticed, out of the corner of her eye, that Marco was doing the same.

“How do you all like your threads? You all look fantastic, if I may say so myself,” beamed the devil. “The party itself doesn’t start until tomorrow’s afternoon, I am afraid. It would be good manners for you to keep the costumes on through your stay, of course. I’d be happy to entertain you tonight as well. Perhaps a tour of…”

“Actually, Sam,” Tom spoke. “We are thankful for the offer, but I believe we are all quite tired from a long journey. Perhaps showing us to our rooms would be enough for the day?”

He turned and winked at Star, and at the rest of them. Of course, the less time they spent with Sam around, the better. So long as they could find a polite excuse to get away.

“Mmm, Tom, bro, I am a little disappointed in you,” remarked their host. Despite the words, he was grinning. “I do not believe that early rest matches the role of a proper scoundrel, now, does it?”

Right. Right. ’Be in character, or else’. Oh, Star was really getting to hate this guy. She looked back at Tom, to see if he was worried, as he often was when Sam was involved, or angry perhaps, at being toyed with like this. The demon prince was grinning back at his ‘old pal’. 
“Oh, you don’t see a reason why a scoundrel would want to retire to his chambers with a crowd of beautiful ladies? Sam, that’s exactly what this deviant catsuit of yours is telling me I should do!” Tom countered. “I know that’s not your own preference, but surely you understand.” He flashed Sam a strangely cocky grin.

Star could hardly believe this was Tom. Sure, he had always been somewhat suave, and sometimes a bit forward when it came to her, personally. But, ‘three beautiful ladies’? Really? She glanced at Janna, but the stupid cowl of her witch costume didn’t allow anyone to see her face. She would have paid to see her reaction to that statement!

“Ah, indeed. Well played, Tommy boy, very well played,” Sam smiled. “I do believe you will keep to your role quite nicely, after all, bro. But, can all of your playmates say the same? Oh, this is going to be so much fun tomorrow… when we play for keeps. Very well... early rest it is. Goodnight.”

He clapped his hands once, and they were all yanked out of place once more.

-----

Star looked out through the window of her room. Bonfires burned in the city below. It was subtle, this high up, but the scent was one of burning meat. She doubted it was a barbecue. Sam hadn’t been kidding when he said they would probably not enjoy a visit down there. Star shrugged, hell was what hell was, after all. She closed her eyes and dipped down. In front of her, the ghostly green form of Moon the Undaunted appeared, floating in mid air, immobile. It was not her mom, and it was not the creature from last night. It was merely a simulation, a sculpture of light.

She pointed her wand at the image and pierced her mom’s heart with a single ray of dark violet energy. The mirage popped away like a soap bubble. There. That was how easy it was. So, why hadn’t she been able to do it? Why did she hesitate last night? She knew it wasn’t her mom. She almost got them all killed!

With a growl of frustration, Star pointed her wand down through the open window. A blast of shadow and fire rained down on the burning city below, barely noticeable over the background chaos that was Dis. It relieved the princess of some frustration, and if she hit someone, well, if they were here, not only would they deserve it, she could hardly make their day any worse than Sam’s domain would on its own.

Still, she had failed at the one thing she had been telling herself for days she would not fail at. She had practiced with the statues, many many times, to make sure to strike true. ‘Aim it directly at its heart’ had instructed Eclipsa. Star knew that her mom had failed to kill Toffee, that she had missed her shot, so the princess had diligently practiced her own aim. Even so, she had failed too. She felt angry at herself, she felt like a screwup and, despite the haughty persona flowing from her purple dress, she felt weak.

She heard a knock on the door.

Marco and Jackie, perhaps? She hadn’t seen them since Sam clapped his hands and sent them all to their rooms. Apparently they had all been assigned to different lodgings. Hers looked very similar to her mom’s old room in Mewni, of course, because that was the kind of thing that gave the devil his jollies or something. At this point, Star barely cared. There had at least been a warm dinner on the table when she had popped into existence there.

“Who is it?” she asked.
“Me,” responded a hesitant familiar voice.

“Tom?” she asked, surprised. “Come on in. Did you and Janna get separated in this place as well?”

“Nah, he put us both together,” he replied as he entered the room. Looking around with wide eyes. “Is this...?”

“Yup,” she cut him. She hoped that made it clear that she wasn’t going to discuss whose room this looked like.

Tom looked like he was about to say something, but then seemly thought better of it. Instead, he added, “well, if it’s any consolation, he put Janna and I in much crappier digs. Think a cross between a rental room at a bordello and a pharmacy, with all these weird flasks on the walls.”

“So, a room for a witch and whatever a ‘scoundrel’ is supposed to be in this case?” Star observed. “Anyways, Tom, why are you not there with Janna now, then?”

“Ah, well, she wanted to be alone right now, actually. She said something about figuring out a thing she might have forgotten,” the demon prince explained. “And, well, after what happened last night, and what happened just now down there... I had to make sure you were ok.”

“Tom, you didn’t have to do anything,” Star remarked pointedly. “I am fine. I can take care of myself.”

The moment she said the words, she regretted them. After all, they weren’t even true. If not for Tom, they would have all lost last night, possibly died, maybe something worse.

“I... I am sorry, Star, I didn’t mean...” Tom looked like she had just slapped him on the face. He began walking towards the door. “Well, anyways, glad to see you are alright...”

It was a very different Tom than the one she had seen last night. She remembered him floating into the air, invoking whatever weird magics he had by virtue of being the ruler of the particular underworld they were in. She remembered the strain on his body from commanding those energies, and how fierce he had seemed in his proclamation. Honestly, it had been kind of impressive. She had seen Tom angry and vengeful before, but never on someone else’s behalf, and never quite so in control. When he fell, at the end, Star had been terrified. She jumped to catch him, even as her own body burned with pain.

“Tom, wait!” she stopped him. “I am sorry. And thank you... for checking on me, and for yesterday too. Also, well, thank you for being there for me, these past few days. I... I am not alright. I think it’s pretty obvious I am not even close to alright.”

Tom gave her a very faint smile. “Want to talk about it, Star? I might know a thing or two about not being alright.”

She looked at him, hesitantly. For a moment, she wondered what his angle was. What was Tom planning?

A few months ago, the answer would have been obvious, even to a far more naive version of herself. But Tom was with Janna these days, wasn’t he? Plus, he had given no signal of wanting to be anything but friends with the princess since they patched things up. Except, well, last night, as he passed out, he had called her Starship again. Hadn’t he? And now he was alone with her, in her room, at night, in his magical gigolo outfit. It was reasonable to wonder, wasn’t it? Star didn’t think it was unfair to at least consider whether the demon might have less than perfectly chaste intentions in being here tonight. But was she wondering because she feared he might have ulterior
motives? Or because she hoped so?

Her glance traveled up the slim leather pants and the dark silk shirt, to the lean and toned chest underneath, and the mysterious tattoo half visible in the exposed part of his chest. Whatever did peek out was vaguely triangle-shaped. In most other boys, the ensemble would have perhaps looked just a little too feminine, but Tom managed to pull it off quite nicely. Something inside tugged at her as she regarded the fiend. Was the feeling her own? Or perhaps something in her own role? Either way, it was a terrible idea. She was with Marco, Tom was with Janna. Plus, every time there had been something between the two of them before, it had ended in tears.

Tom blushed and then looked down, guiltily. “I, I know how this looks like, but... Just talk, I swear! I can handle this stupid costume. After what I did to you that night, the night of the concert... I don’t want to hurt you like that again, Star!”

Star pondered the words for a minute. Then realized she had something else to say about that night, something she should have said back in St O’s, or during the last week. Something she only now fully understood, with the perspective of much deeper wounds.

“Tom, I think I am the one who should have apologized for that night. You told me exactly what you wanted, and I said yes, and then I used you,” she pointed out. “I am not saying you going all fire and brimstone at the end was a nice look. But, well, now that I understand what having real anger burn within you feels like, anger you can’t quench or suppress, I am just saying: I get it. I hurt you, and you made an effort not to hurt me in return, as best you could. Then I acted as if you had been the bad guy or, well, the only bad guy, as if I was blameless.”

He tried to say something and Star cut him off with a wave of her hand.

“But that’s not the worst part,” she continued. “I knew you were in pain before, since we broke up, since even before that. I knew you were dealing with dark difficult things, ugly things, and my response was to abandon you. And now, when it is I who is hurting and full of fire, and no one can stand to be around me, you have been there for me... For all I have complained about you before, and for all I made you say you were sorry, in the end you are a better friend to me than I was to you. Tom. I am sorry.”

“Star, you don’t need to apologize,” Tom walked up towards her and hugged her. “It was not your job to fix my problems, it was mine. You have probably been the best friend I have ever had, and the best girlfriend too.”

Wait? Was he saying...? What about Janna?

“Maybe you are right Tom. It wasn’t my job. But neither is it yours to help me with mine, and yet here you are. Even Marco has no idea what to do with me now. Hell, even I don’t know what I want...” she vented.

It really wasn’t the human boy’s fault, he was doing the best he could to be there for Star. But, well, he didn’t get it. There was no darkness in Marco Diaz’s life, other than that which Star herself brought him, and she didn’t want to show him even half of what was boiling inside of her now. But Tom? Maybe Tom would understand.

“What do you think you want, Star?” he asked, cautiously.

“To avenge my mom,” she replied without hesitation. Then, a few seconds later, “To get rid of this need to hurt someone, badly. To feel something other than anger, and emptiness, and cold. To not hurt him, of all people...”
Star had been so lonely these days. Yes, she was avoiding Marco, at least as much as he avoided her. But it was not that she didn’t want the company. She had fantasized about being with him so many times this week, about crying, and shouting, about breaking things, and about making love. But she had to retain control, because if she didn’t, if she let go, she would hurt him. Even now, she was thinking of doing something that would surely hurt him, if he ever knew. It would hurt him, and Tom, and Janna too.

Ah, hell, screw Janna! She had been nothing but a snappy bitch to Star these days. And screw Marco too. After all, he hadn’t come to find her, Tom had! Marco had Jackie, Jackie and self-righteous sermons about how Star was turning evil for wanting to get some payback on her mom’s killer. He got two, it was only fair that she got two as well, wasn’t it?

With her new outfit’s heels, Star was almost at eye level with Tom, so it was just a matter of pushing herself slightly.

She kissed him.

He didn’t recoil from it, and soon their lips were opening, their tongues intertwined in passion. Star’s hands roaming the sides of his torso. His hands behind her back, seeking her wings.

She pushed herself away. “Wait, Tom! I shouldn’t do this!” she exclaimed. It was crazy! It was the costume speaking, and all of her frustration listening to it!

“Right, right, you are in a vulnerable moment, and you are with Marco, and I am being a huge jerk again...” Tom started walking back horrified. “I am so sorry, Star.”

“What? Are you kidding? Weren’t you listening just now?!” Star shouted at him. “You are not being a jerk. I am! I... I was about to use you again, Tom. I am lonely, and messed up, and angry at... at too many people, and I was just about to foist all that stuff on you, again, because you are the one person I am apparently ok with hurting, even though lately you have been nothing but kind to me. Once again, I am sorry...”

“So, basically, you mean you are not in love with me - which, big surprise, I knew that - but that you want me for... for what exactly?” he asked.

“I, I haven’t been with Marco since my mom died. I don’t even know if we are still a thing. I guess we are. But he can’t deal with the darkest parts of me right now, nor can I show them to him, and those are the ones that want to do this,” she explained. “I don’t want to stay like this forever: cold on the outside, boiling with rage on the inside. I want to be the girl Marco used to like, and I do still like him too. But I do miss... I need... I am sorry... I mean... fuck, I am horrible.”

“You thought you could pump me and dump me? Use me to get off and to unleash all the dark stuff you got clogged up in there?” Tom clarified. He was remarkably candid, and remarkably accurate. She nodded, ashamed. Then, he added, “ok, works for me, Star. Let’s do this.”

“What?! Tom, it is not a nice thing... I mean, I know you like me - like, like me like me - and this is not fair to you!” Star reminded him. “I can’t give you what I know you really want from me. Besides, what about Janna?”

He closed the distance between them in a swift step. Looking at Star in the eyes, he replied, “You told me exactly what you wanted, and I said yes. What happens to me now is my own damn fault. It’s roughly what you said before, so it sounds extremely fair to me, Star.”

He kissed her deeply, hungrily, pushing her body against his with his right arm. She kissed him
back, and felt something foul and nasty, and disturbingly enjoyable, break free inside her. She was no longer at the point of giving any more warnings. Tom wanted her to let go, and she would. So much pent up frustration, so much pent up stress, and far worse things.

She felt a devious inspiration then, 'The Countess’ no doubt, and she pointed her wand at Tom’s chest. She threw him back into her bed with a relatively gentle wave of force. Relatively gentle for the two of them, of course. The demon prince yelped, not in pain, but in surprise.

“Tom, sit there. I have something to show you,” she announced. His shock turned into a delighted grin as Star put the wand down by the floor, slowly kicked away her boots, and began undoing the lace strings holding the blouse of her gown together.

Sure, the rules said to stay in costume at all times, but somehow she didn’t believe Sam would count this one against them. It didn’t seem like his style.

Tom’s three eyes were glued to the middle of the princess’ chest now. Whatever this dress was, it had more lift there than anything the mewman had worn before. But even so, it was not like there was much to lift in the first place. Tom licked his lips hungrily, and that gave Star all the confidence boost she needed to continue. She let the fabric fall from over one of her shoulders, and the dress slipped down until it was barely above her nipple. She stopped there, as long as she could hold, resisting the urge of rushing the surprise.

He looked at her attentively and impatiently, but said nothing. Star closed her eyes, dipped down, and the fabric began turning translucent. Slowly, ever so slowly, it vanished. She raised her left hand, and a web of green ribbons of light rose from beneath the floor. It passed through the furniture of the room, but was solid to the two teens. It lifted him from the bed and herself from the floor. Naked, smiling, she began crawling along the spiderweb towards a very bewildered Tom.

“Mephistopheles on a monocycle, Starship! ... I mean, Star, sorry... Since when can you do this sort of thing without your wand?!” the demon prince asked. Apparently she had managed to surprise him indeed.

“Oh, 'Starship’ is fine, actually,” she remarked, as she reached the middle of the web, rolling herself to his side, pressing her naked body against his still clothed form, whispering in his ear. “And you’d be surprised the things I can do now...

Her eyes glowed green as she traced a finger through the exposed triangle of his chest, a thin trace of green flame burned below her touch. It was what he had done to her, many times before, light pain, soothing pleasure. Tom gasped. “How about you show me, again, what you can do to me?”

She rolled Tom’s body over her own, with extreme ease, positioning him above herself. She crossed her legs around his, pressing her naked crotch against the leather pants of his costume. She felt a swell in the hard fabric reward her performance.

Clumsily, still incredulous, Tom began undoing the buttons of his shirt, letting it fall open to the sides. It was a star. The tattoo. Of course it was a star. A message for her, then, from Sam. He knew this would happen, the smug asshole.

“Star, you are going to need to let go a little bit there if you want me to remove those too,” the demon prince remarked, looking down at his pants, just as he threw his shirt to the floor through the magic net. Star just wiggled, relishing the probably uncomfortable pressure building up inside the boy’s trousers.

“I thought you were supposed to be some dashing rogue with those on, my devilish scoundrel,” she
joked. “Why don’t you figure a way to make me let go?”

Tom looked at her confused for only one more instant, then he smiled. “Starship, you should know, I am a devilish scoundrel in any clothing.”

His claws snapped closed around her wrists, and he lowered his mouth against her neck. He kissed her, at first. Then he bit softly. Then he slid the tips of his razor sharp teeth all over the right side of her nape, and down to the shoulder. If anything, it made her legs close tighter around him, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Oooh,” exclaimed Star, appreciatively.

He breathed a hot excited breath along the front of her neck as he moved his head to the other side, repeating his previous actions on her left. After that, he moved up, to nibble on her lobe. He was moving rhythmically against her as he did so. She could feel his strong naked chest against her breasts and the texture of the raised leather against her mound. She wondered if that would stain his pants.

As he rocked against her, he begun to slid lower and lower, until his mouth was hovering over her breast. She waited, and waited. Her entire focus on his breathing over her hard expectant nipple. Instead, she felt a claw caress the boundary between her outer lower lips and her inner thigh. Suddenly, she opened her eyes, and realized Tom was grinning at her from below. As she relaxed in anticipation of his mouth over her chest, he had escaped the hold of her legs! They were now around his abdomen, and he was busy pushing his pants away from his ankles.

“Seems like I win,” Tom remarked, as he finally deigned to lower his mouth over her breast, his tongue dancing circles around the small mounds and flicking at her pert nipples. Star disagreed, this seemed to her a lot like her winning.

Then again, nice as his kisses and touches were, she was looking for something more... visceral. She wanted to let go of things inside her that weren’t all puppies and rainbows. It was why she wanted him tonight, him in particular. She dug her fingernails into Tom’s back. The demon didn’t even seem to notice. With another plunge into the depths of her magic, Star sent waves of pain directly into his back muscles through the tips of her fingers. Violet lightning crisscrossed his purple flesh like ivy over a stone wall. The demon prince grunted and howled.

“Tom, I am going to need you to hurt me too,” she explained.

Two fingers plunged themselves into her cunt, just as the boy bit hard on her nipple. Shit! Ouch! Fuck! Yeah, that was what she was talking about, actually! Star howled and moaned.

“Good boy!” she remarked.

Soon, she got used to the motions of Tom finger-fucking her, and the pain was replaced by pleasure as her already wet sex became drenched enough to accommodate the fast motions. His teeth scraping along her chest, as well as the embracing fires, continued to provide a source of soothing torment. They proceeded that way for a while. Every so often, he would hold his fingers inside her as his open palm rubbed her most sensitive spot from the outside, slowly, almost gently, just as he bit hard on her breast for contrast.

“Aaaaah, fuck! Ok, Tom, my turn,” she eventually spoke. The entire web twisted around them, and she was now on top of him once more. “How do you like it?” she asked, confidently. A far cry from their previous time together.
“However you need it, Starship,” he responded with an equally cocky grin.

With that invitation extended to her, Star proceeded to rock herself over the boy’s erect member. Soon, effortlessly, he was inside her. She bounced up and down a bit, but something wasn’t right. It was not doing it for her. Not in the way she needed.

The princess slowed down and pushed Tom down with her arms and chest. She pressed his wrists against the magical net, and soon two extra ribbons of light snapped around her partners arms, then two around his legs. She kissed him softly. With a grin, she instructed him calmly, “I am going to need you to struggle.”

Tom blinked for a moment, then returned her smile. He began trashing, pulling against the magical restraints. It was not enough. Star didn’t feel like he was trying to escape, not really, just giving a very half-hearted show of it. Frustrated, she pushed two fingers towards the middle of Tom’s star tattoo. A burst of green flames sprouted from it, burning him for real. She began tracing the contours of the star on his flesh.

Tom yelled. His eyes turned into bright red coals. He began trembling and fighting for real, and as he did, Star continued to push herself up and down his cock, faster and faster. She felt powerful, she felt in control. This is what she wanted, what she needed. To hurt Tom, to subdue him, to have him squirm below her mighty fury! This was why she couldn’t have done this with Marco, why she needed the demon tonight. This time, he was what she needed, what she wanted. “Toooom!” she screamed.

“Staaarrgh!!” he shouted in agony. Then, as she removed her hand from his abdomen, worried that she was harming him for real, he added, in the softest whisper, “... continue.”

She looked at her hands, they were dark, filled with glowing purple veins. In her arousal, she had long ago forgotten to maintain the stupid glamour. She pressed both her palms into Tom’s chest, and let some of the darkness flow out of her. Red fire burned all around them as Tom screeched. Not wanting to burn the place down, and anger their infernal host in the process, Star contained the flames in a shielding bubble. It was remarkable that, in the throes of passion, she still had this much control. She was so more powerful than she had ever been. It felt... exhilarating.

She focused on her movements then, on the wonderfully filling sensations of impaling herself on Tom’s cock. She kept one hand on his chest, pumping pain into him, as she brought the other one down to her sex. The combined stimulation of her trashing prey and her own fingers were drawing her closer and closer to the end. Tom’s own pulsating orgasm was the final straw that sent her flying out of her skull. Almost literally so.

She could, for a second, see the scene from the outside. She was by the room’s ceiling, floating amongst a green mist. She saw her own expression of maniacal glee and blissed-out climax. She saw Tom’s burning red eyes, and the charred marks in the flesh of his chest. In an instant, she was back inside her own body.

“Oh, crap! Tom, are you ok?” she asked as she rolled herself down to his side. Star knew Tom was tough, really tough. It was the only reason she had allowed herself to go this far. But what if she had gone too far, even for him?

“I am fine, Starship. Demon, remember? I can handle a bit of doom and hellfire. It’s not even the first time I have been on this side of the fire play. Although, I must confess, doing that with you is... an experience,” he smiled, even as he winced. “Guess now I have an idea of how Janna feels...”

Star saw Tom’s expression turn sour at this, and perhaps a bit guilty. Right, Janna! Tom was with
And what about Star herself? She was with Marco! And with Jackie, sort of. What was it they had said about other people, a lifetime ago? 'If either of you ever have some other guy you like, then we should talk about it, and have the same deal apply. I would feel like such a jerk otherwise…’ is what Marco had said. This didn’t seem like talking about it first, though.

She had felt justified, before. She had thought herself as being almost, albeit not completely, in the right. She had reasoned that Janna was irritating, and Marco too self-righteous, and that anyways two for two was fair. Star didn’t feel so sure about those arguments now.

“I think this was a mistake, Tom,” she remarked.

“Yeah...” he answered.

Star didn’t know if it was her imagination, but he sounded even more guilty than she felt.

----

She was by the room’s ceiling, floating amongst a green mist. She saw Star’s expression of maniacal glee and blissed-out climax as she rode the demon. She saw Tom’s burning red eyes, and the charred marks in the flesh of his chest. She saw the princess’ fingernails digging into purple burnt skin, black tendrils flowing from one body and into the other as he howled in pain and she cried in pleasure.

In an instant, Jackie was back inside her own body, pale with shock. Back in the dark damp bare cell of a room that Sam had prepared for Marco and herself. She turned around in the small pile of straw that served as her bed, towards the boy. Right now, he sat resting against the stone wall of their prison-like accommodations, and looked as if he too had just been startled awake.

“Marco, I am not sure what just happened, but I think I just saw Star and...”

“Yeah, me too...”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah... that just happened. It's tomstar folks, but not as you know it!

Believe it or not, this was planned way before Season 3 brought us a much fluffier version of tomstar. In fact, originally I was kind of afraid that this pairing would be reviled by the fandom in general (it wasn't in canon, but the way it happens here it still might be, of course ;) ), which explains the wording for Chapter 17, First Comment, Secret #2, Password: justfiends

**Coming up next:** Chapter 25: Each Alone

*In which our main three have disturbing dreams, and Janna finally shows her true colors*
Chapter Summary

In which our main three have disturbing dreams, and Janna finally shows her true colors.

Chapter Notes

(Published on Feb 14/15) Oh well, I just realized that, this is like, the opposite of a Valentine's Day special. I swear it wasn't even intentional.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 25: Each Alone

Star Butterfly sat atop her pink flying cloud. It was wider than usual, because it had to accommodate more people than usual. Around her laid Marco, Tom, and Jackie too. They were all naked, while Star wore the Countess disguise Sam had given her. They were all happy, they did as Star wished, as her mind commanded. A thought, and Tom began massaging her back. A gesture, and Marco leaned in to kiss her. A nod, and Jackie fed her some grapes.

She was dreaming, of course, Star knew that. It was a good dream.

Below her was the city of Dis, or at least her mental image of it. Its narrow streets looked like those of Mewni, except they were submerged in rivers of flame, and there, covered up to their waist in burning oil, were the damned. There was Ludo and his monsters, except Buff Frog, of course, who was nice. There was Toffee, for sure deserving of any and every torment hell could dish out. There was Princess White, and that snake monster thing that had lived inside Tom’s vase. There was the green phantasm that pretended to be, but certainly wasn’t, her mother. There was Brittney, because why not? And Ruberioth, because of that stupid song. Sam was there too, and he was in pain, for all that it made no sense. Yeah, it was the people who had wronged Star that now suffered in hell. Their cries were music to her ears.

“Oh dear,” spoke a voice above Star. The princess looked up to see Eclipsa descending slowly, floating in mid air by holding on to a large purple umbrella. As soon as she matched Star’s altitude, she stopped there in place. “This is certainly some interesting imagery, don’t you think?”

“Meh, it’s just a dream,” Star shrugged. “Dreams are weird.”

“They most certainly are,” Eclipsa agreed, with a twinkle in her eye. “They can also be rather insightful.”

The older Butterfly glanced meaningfully at Marco, and suddenly he was wearing a pair of square glasses. Still deliciously buck naked, mind you, but with glasses.
He cleared his throat, “Well, obviously a power fantasy, with some cathartic revenge imagery, and rather blatant sexual overtones. At the same time, having all three of us tend to you, represents…”

“Sssshh,” Star brought a finger to the boy’s mouth as she silenced him. Then she turned back towards Eclipsa. “Ok, I get it: Bad dream about being bad is bad. ‘Dark queen ascending’, yada yada…”

“Do you feel... dark?” Eclipsa asked, gently.

“No!” Star shouted. Green lightning sprouted all around cloudy, some of that color mixing in with the pink in the spell’s form. The flames below rose and roared furiously. Eclipsa lifted an eyebrow. “Okay. Yes. Yes I do. I mean, I don’t think I am doing evil things, not exactly. Seducing Tom... if you can even call it that... was... bad... and maybe I owe Marco a huge apology... But, on the other hand, it’s not like that qualifies for ‘great prophetic evil’ levels of bad, does it? And I do want to destroy the thing that killed my mom, I really do, which is sort of a dark thought to have… but that doesn’t mean I really want to cast Ruberioth or Brittney into the fires of hell! I think I still know the difference there!”

“Sleeping with a demon and using the dark arts to vanquish your foes? I was condemned of no greater crimes than those,” Eclipsa pointed out. “But, as you say, that alone perhaps didn’t truly make me evil. It did make me a Dark Queen, however, in the eyes of many. So, I think what you need to ask yourself is, what are you afraid of? That you will be called evil? Or that you will do something you *yourself* think of as evil?”

“I...” Star thought about it. She thought really hard. “I am afraid I will change the definition. That I will do things that are evil, and not see them as such.”

“For example?” Eclipsa pressed on. “Torturing the songstrel?”

“No! Of course not!” Although, a part of Star genuinely wanted to, which scared her enough. “For example, sleeping with Tom. Or, well, hurting him, even though he said it was ok... I don’t think I would have done it, you know, before. Isn’t wanting to hurt people, like, in general, evil?”

Eclipsa shrugged. “Don’t look at me. Figment of your imagination, after all. I also don’t think the real Eclipsa could answer that for you, either. Only you can answer those kinds of questions as they apply to yourself.”

“Gee, thanks! Super insightful dream and all!” Star grumbled. “Couldn’t we go back to the version of the dream that involved shoulder rubs, kisses, and fruit?”

“Well, Star,” spoke Jackie, tentatively. “I think, and I might be wrong, but I think, that you could do that easily, if that dream hadn’t been making you feel so incredibly guilty.”

Star groaned in frustration. There was just no winning against her own subconscious, apparently.

“Word of advise, if I may, Princess Butterfly,” came a smug voice arising from the flames below. “Guilt is overrated.”

Sam, or Star’s dream of Sam, to be precise, floated up from the sea of flames. His body still burned, even in mid air, but it seemed not to faze him in the slightest.

“Oh, sorry... I meant: Oh. Ouch. It burns. I am in pain,” he added in a monotone. “Better?”

“Oh, right,” Star muttered. “Here it comes: the ‘go ahead and just be evil!’ speech, as delivered by myself through the most unsubtle dream spokesperson imaginable!”
“Now, now, that’s not what I said,” Sam remarked, with a mock pout. He held both his palms up. “I said guilt is overrated. Not goodness. Not principles. Not morality. Guilt.”

“Isn’t feeling guilty a sign that I did something I shouldn’t have done, though?” Star asked. Involuntarily, she looked at her dream image of Tom. But he was immobile, looking down. So were Marco, and Jackie. Even Eclipsa had been frozen in mid air.

“Perhaps. But, well, did it stop you from doing it? Did you not know, as you were doing it, that it was the wrong thing to do?” Sam asked. He motioned all around them with both arms, “You know, there are a lot of people that say that the reason souls end up in hell is that they crave the punishment, that it is their guilt that drags them here, not their actions.”

He smiled, a mirthless knowing smile.

“They are wrong, of course, but the point is still rather poetic,” the devil clarified. “You make no one’s life better by feeling guilty once you have picked your desired course of action. Self-flagellating is not going to heal Tom’s flesh, or undo having fornicated with him, or clean up your betrayal of those you think you love. However minor those sins might be in the cosmic scale, they are now your own, whether you regret them or embrace them. Feeling guilty will certainly not revive those you will kill, heal those you will hurt, or undo the dark magic you have summoned. It will not protect your friends of the harm you already know you will likely inflict on them, either, and it has not prevented you from putting them at risk. You agonized many many times about scrying on them, and yet you never stopped, nor told them about it, until you got caught.” He paused then, letting Star digest all of that. “You see how guilt is useless, or very nearly so? My point is not about what you should or shouldn’t do, then. But if you are going to sin, at least own the sin! Enjoy it!”

Star felt Tom’s hands back on her shoulders, Marco’s palm rubbing her arm. Jackie, like a clockwork automaton, began moving again, feeding Star once more.

“Have your fantasy, Star! Be loved, served, feared... forgiven. Watch me burn and whimper inside your mind! Do as you will, and once done, don’t give yourself hell about it. There will be time enough for that! Do good, or do evil, or both, or neither, but don’t waste your time yelling at yourself inside your skull for what you did or know you will do anyways! Regret makes you no more virtuous than satisfaction.” Sam grinned wildly and then began truly yelling in agony, crying even, quite convincingly, as he fell back towards the burning city below.

It was only much later, long after she’d woken up, that it occurred to Star that, while nothing Eclipsa, Marco, or Jackie had said were things Star didn’t know on some level or another, that whole anecdote about why people thought they went to hell was not something that would normally occur to her.

----

Marco Diaz looked down at the girl lying asleep in front of him and sighed. He had covered her with the remains of his tattered red hoodie. She needed it more than he did, after all; winters were brutal in Ennio, and a roof over their heads was a luxury neither of them might ever know again. He leaned against the huge stone walls that enclosed them all, more a pen for wild animals than a prison for humans. Then again, many would dispute that those housed there were human in the first place.

The girl herself had narrow snake-like slitted pupils in her eyes, vaguely batrachian looking limbs, and bat wings for ears. What did the guards see when they looked at her? A freak? A monster? An abomination? Or just a poor damned soul with a deadly disease to be contained? Yet, as Marco
watched her sleep, as he saw her shiver in the cold winter night, as he remembered her lost scared glances a few hours ago - when she was lowered down inside the great walled circle that was Ennio Prison - he could not think of her as anything but a scared little girl. To him, she was certainly more human than those who patrolled above the walls.

She was very young, perhaps younger than Marco had been when he began his quest to hunt down Hekapoo and her clones. How long ago had that been? Seven years? Eight? Nine? He wasn’t sure. There were known gaps in his memory, after all. Either way, he was older now, well into his twenties. He was much tougher, harder, that he used to be, and yet, apparently, not entirely disabused of misguided compassion.

He sighed. Allion would have yelled at him for being such a fool. Why did he do this to himself? He knew the girl would not make it through the week, with or without his assistance. That was half the reason he hadn’t bothered to ask her name yet. This place was not made for little lost girls. This place was hell.

“Hey pretty boy, how about you hand that sweet little thing over? Doesn’t seem you are making much use of her,” Marco heard. He raised his eyes to find himself looking at another prisoner, a burly ‘freak’ who was giving him a particularly nasty grin. Case-in-fucking-point.

The man was huge, taller than people had any right being and twice over as broad. His entire body was this amorphous blob of swollen human flesh covered in gray protrusions of some metallic mineral formation. His right arm was solely made of the same, seemingly inorganic, substance and ended in sharp knife-long metallic claws. He had one good eye and a rocky spike protruding out of the socket where the other one should have been. Saying he was merely ugly would have been a feat of politeness, and a misdeed of dishonesty.

“What it looks like is none of your business, bud,” Marco replied, without so much as a shrug. “She is with me. Save yourself the trouble and move along.”

“Now, now, we are both reasonable individuals. Surely she is not worth much trouble to you? After all, we all know you only have eyes for one girl in all of this joint,” the stranger remarked with a snickering laugh.

Right. He probably meant Hekapoo. Why was it that they always mistook his quest to extinguish the clones’ flames for some sort of bizarre romantic pursuit? Couldn’t a guy voluntarily lock himself in a hellish prison as a way to get close to a woman, and have that just be a purely platonic assassination attempt?

“Whereas me, well, I haven’t had myself a birdie like that to warm me at night in quite some time. You know how few of them last even the first day here,” the other prisoner explained, as if he was just haggling over yet another piece of salted beef from their morning rations. “So, I reckon... there is quite a bit of trouble I am willing to get myself into for a succulent little morsel such as her...”

Well, that, right there, was the problem with people arriving to Ennio every single fucking week. Stay out of trouble long enough, and your reputation melted away, and then trouble found you. If this asshole thought Marco was just going to hand him a teenage girl to rape, in order to avoid a fight, then his reputation had surely decayed significantly. If he thought he had a chance in hell of intimidating him, or taking her by force in front of him, then his reputation had most certainly all but vanished by now. When had this imbecile been captured? Not this week, too cocky for that. A month ago? Two months? Three? ... No, not three. Marco had roughed up seven members of the Primal Growl Gang three months ago, people would surely remember that.

“Fine,” Marco sighed and stood up. “Let’s get this over with. Last chance to walk away, you
walking mountain of Osacontt’s dung. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He always did. They never listened.

The other prisoner charged at Marco. Literally charged, like a bull or a rhino, using his bulk and potentially superhuman weight in an attempt to bulldoze his opponent. This guy put the ‘brute’ in brute force! Marco had seen more fighting skill out of fresh cadets in his early days as a soldier for the guild in Zonst. Normally, he would dodge. But, if he did, then he wasn’t sure this idiot wouldn’t just trample over the sleeping girl.

Instead, he brought his palms together, rapidly executed a sequence of twelve hand gestures as he repeated as many words in the Ancient Tongue. He felt the ritual warm him up, despite the icy wind around them, he felt his muscles strain to contain the power, his bones rattle under the magical fire coursing through his veins. Swiftly, he jumped over the girl’s body, and raised a single hand in front of him. His palm made contact with the iron-like skin of the lowlife’s right arm, effortlessly stopping his momentum.

“What the hell?! How did you...” the thug started to ask.

Marco simply smiled and drove his other fist right into the soft fleshy bits of the deformed man’s stomach. He probably shouldn’t have felt so great about hurting the poor bastard. Everyone in Ennio was a victim first and foremost, reacting inhumanly to inhuman circumstances. Yet, there were those in here that he couldn’t quite muster genuine compassion for, no matter how sad their own fate, because of the pain they so readily inflicted on others. This animal was clearly one such case.

Marco tried to compensate for the effects the ritual had on his mind, but, honestly, he didn’t try too hard. He didn’t think he would mind hurting this bastard even in his unaltered state. Right now, high on the side-effects of the spell, he relished causing him pain.

The massive prisoner clutched his stomach with his left hand, then clawed at Marco’s face with his right. Once again, it was trivial for the young man to block with his left arm, holding onto the crushing weight of the metal appendage by its tree-thick wrist. The Fierceness Ritual didn’t just make him a hundred times as strong, it also made him at least ten times as nimble. His opponent had lost the fight as soon as Marco had completed the gestures involved. He squished the iron until he heard the bones beneath crack.

“Auggghhh!!” yelped his opponent, tears of pain falling from his good eye socket. Marco had an idea right then, a delicious idea. He knew it was the ritual talking, but, well, he was listening. There would be time for regrets later. He pulled the mountain of a man down by tugging at his broken arm, moved his hand along the limb towards the thug’s face, placed his thumb right in front of his remaining eye, and pressed down, hard.

The shout that followed was one of primal torment.

“There, there, don’t cry,” Marco chided, cheerfully. “Now, what were you saying about her being worth the trouble?”

“I... I... I was wrong... I am sorry... sir,” the giant spoke through the pain. Marco was half impressed by that, most people would not be able to do much more than howl in agony after a broken arm and a freshly ruptured eyeball. “Please, let me go. You’ll never see me again, I swear...”

“No, I won’t. No one will. Now, what did you call her? ‘A succulent little morsel’?” Marco
pondered as he moved his right arm back once more. Slowly, the limb began turning a dark shade of purple. It became sinuous and pliable. The tentacle appendage kept growing and changing, until it had taken the distinct form of his demonic colleague. “I suppose you are going to be much less appetizing than that, but my pal here is not a picky eater... Kar, it’s supper time, Bon Appetit.”

“Oh boy! Have I mentioned how infinitely more fun you are to be around when you do the whole bad boy power-up thing, kid?,” spoke a toothy mouth in the middle of his very own monster arm. “You should really do it more often!”

It was just a demonic curse that Star had cast on Marco by mistake, back a lifetime ago, before Hekapoo’s quest. It was alive and intelligent, and an altogether vicious asshole, with a taste for human entrails. It turned out he had a name too, or had given himself a name: Kar’Margorach. Most days, Marco wished he could get rid of the damn thing. But sometimes, Kar came in handy. He had been useful in getting Marco ‘admitted’ into Ennio and its deformed crowd, and, right now, he was making quick work of devouring the stupid bully in front of them. Kar had started eating with its prey still alive, but that, of course, did not last long.

Marco felt satisfied, happy even. Sure, most of it was the side-effect of the ritual. It made him... less squeamish than he would otherwise be, perhaps a tiny bit callous, even ‘bloodthirsty’ might not be entirely incorrect either. He knew he would hate the way he was acting now, the very thoughts that crossed his mind, as soon as the spell wore off. He would be sick to his stomach. But, right now, all he could think was that after something like this, surely his reputation as someone not to be messed with would last more than a few lousy months.

His thoughts, and Kar’s meal, were interrupted by a high pitched yell coming from behind him.

He turned around to see the young girl fully awake, crawling her way along the wall, away from the fight, away from him. She dragged herself, half limping, as if still unused to her new anatomy. His own hoodie laid discarded on the floor.

“Oh, you are awake,” Marco remarked. “Sorry about that. Don’t worry. You are safe now.”

He gave her what he intended to be a friendly smile, and waved a bloodied left hand at her. Behind him, there was the sound of bones breaking and Kar burping loudly.

“Oh god! Oh god!! S...Stay away from me!!” she yelled, and broke into a run.

Marco woke up sweating.

----

Jackie opened her eyes. She could feel the clumps of straw in her hair. The harsh material scratched her skin as well, even through the tattered fabric of her costume. She was lying on the same pile of straw that Sam had arranged to be her bed, in the same clothes he had assigned to her. But she was no longer in her cell, no longer in Sam’s castle, no longer in hell. At least, not in the literal kind.

Around her, and her small pile of hay, was the open courtyard of St Olga’s, where she had once fought princess White. Marco was nowhere to be seen. Nor, for that matter, was anyone else, until...

“Wow, shit! We look like crap!” came a voice from right behind her.

Jackie turned around and found herself face to face with, well, with herself. But while her actual self was wearing the rags of the slave costume, the other version of her, the one standing tall above,
giving her a pitying look, was dressed in bright golden armor. It was the same armor she had worn back when she last was here, the armor she fought a duel in: Prince Jack’s literal (and figurative) ‘knight in shining armor’ outfit.

“Who are...? How...? Um… What’s going on?” the girl managed to ask, still disoriented.

“I am you. A better you. The version of you as you wish you truly were,” answered her mirror double, as to the matter of who she was. “How? You are dreaming, of course. What’s going on? Well, what’s ‘going on’ is that we need to talk, Jackie. Oh boy, do we need to talk!”

A dream? That… that made sense. It was as good an explanation as any. Better than just assuming she had completely lost her mind!

“Ok, um, so, what do you want to talk about?” Jackie asked, cautiously, as she sat up to face her doppelganger. She was still not sure this was what it seemed. She had never had a dream like this one before. But, then again, was that not true of most dreams?

“Mostly? About how disappointed we both are with, well, with ourselves,” the other Jackie replied dryly. “I mean, just look at us! We went from this,” she motioned her hand over her own form. Then, in a swift movement, she unsheathed the golden magic sword and drove the point forward, stopping right in front of the Jackie’s true nose, “to that!”

“Oh, come on! That’s not fair,” Jackie pushed the sword aside with her hand. “Ok, I don’t like this stupid costume, obviously, or else we wouldn’t be having this little fantasy chat. But it is what we need to wear to get through whatever bizarre costume party we signed up for. I think I can deal with that for two days, and then we are rid of it. No big deal.”

“That’s not what we meant,” Prince Jack shook his head. “Think, Jackie! Of course we need to wear the damn thing, you know... out there,” he gesture widely towards the heavens. “But this is a dream, we can look however you want in here, and yet you chose to keep the rags on.” He sighed. “You want to know why? Because that’s how we see ourselves now. And I am here to vehemently protest that!”

Jackie froze on the spot. How she saw herself now? That couldn’t be right! This costume was all a cruel prank, after all, from some demonic asshole no less! It was a disguise that she would endure with grace and as much dignity as humanly possible, but not one that she would choose for herself. Not that she really saw her, permanently, as the haughty Prince Jack either, but...

“You are so full of shit, dude!” Prince Jack interrupted her thoughts. “It is how we see ourselves: weak, broken, defeated.”

An image flashed before Jackie’s eyes. It was herself, charging valiantly with a sword in hand, a sword of steel held in the dark, rather than the shining golden blade of her princely self. She heard an exasperated, dismissive voice mutter ‘Oh, for corn’s sake.’ She saw herself being kicked away, her sword broken in half, and her body doubling over to vomit.

“Now, Jackie, answer me: Did that look like me? Or like you?” Prince Jack asked coldly.

“Well, easy for you to say it!” Jackie retorted angrily. “We were powered up by Star when we were you. We were stronger, faster, not to mention magically protected from harm. I can’t do the things you could, not without Star!”

“Yes, true,” Prince Jack conceded. “And it eats at us that it is so. Doesn’t it?”

Jackie had no answer. No honest retort, nor denial.
“It eats at us that whatever we are is either a foolish dumb girl with a skateboard, or just whatever Star lets us be,” Prince Jack smirked. “You know, like how she lets you play at being Marco’s girlfriend too?”

“What?! Hey, wait a minute! I was Marco’s girlfriend before Star,” Jackie protested. Feeling foolish for arguing with herself, specially about something like this. She felt like she was crazy just for having this conversation. Perhaps she was. She was talking to herself, after all, dream or no dream. “I opened the relationship to her, because I knew Marco liked her and she liked him too, but none of us are pretending anything. We are both Marco’s girlfriends, and it was mostly my doing... or, you know, our doing or whatever... ugh... this is so confusing!”

Prince Jack walked around her, sword still drawn.

“Oh, yeah, right! How noble of us!” she scoffed. “Listen, we both know they would have ended together, sooner rather than later. You know that, right now, if he had to choose, he would choose her. You know it because: He. Told. Us. So.”

It was hard arguing with herself, unfortunately.

“Ok, fine, so he would choose Star!” Jackie retorted, irritated. “It’s like mom said, though, that’s about him first and foremost. Whatever he chooses is not a referendum on us as a person. He can prefer Star without that making us... making me... worthless.”

“If you truly believed that, you wouldn’t be making my case for me, dude!” Prince Jack laughed. “I never said it made you worthless. That’s a judgement you made all on your own. All I was saying is that you only have Marco because Star allows it, just as you are only strong when she is there to let you play the hero. Actually, now that I think of it, I see your point, that does seem pretty worthless to me!”

Jackie glared silently at the prince, trying to not give the dream version of herself any more ammunition for his rant.

“And we both saw what Star did just now, right?” Prince Jack continued, once he realized the girl had no comeback to his last statement. “And Marco still defended her! ‘Oh, she is going through some really harsh stuff. I’ll try to talk to her tomorrow.’ She cheats on him, and yet he would still rather have her than you!”

“That’s not how it went!” she protested, despite herself. “We both agreed Star is not herself these days! That what she did was shitty, really shitty, but that it is better to ask why she did it, given what she is going through. And, seriously, we are in some sort of hellish night-stop with an immortal sadist, forced to play some bizarre role-playing game we only half understand, and being pursued by a glowing horror of green fire who killed her mom!” Jackie yelled back at the golden prince. “Honestly, focusing on this type of drama only makes us kind of petty, dude.”

“You said it, not me.” Prince Jack grinned. “But we do care. We care a whole lot. Or else, I wouldn’t be here, reminding you about it. We care about this, and about her spying on us, and about the fact that despite it all, if Marco had to choose...”

“But he doesn’t have to choose!” she cut him off, annoyed. “We made it so he didn’t have to choose, back when we opened the relationship. We... we could as easily not have pushed him to date Star in the first place... but, but, I didn’t want him to... we didn’t want him to... well, to not have that...”

“What, you want a cookie for not getting in the way? Like you even could!” Prince Jack scoffed.
“Face it, Marco and Star were going to end together whether you opened up the relationship or not. And we knew it. That’s why we did it! It was not an act of selflessness, but of self-preservation.”

No! That wasn’t right. Was it? She had told him to date Star for him, no? Because she wanted Marco to be as happy as he could be, to share in on the happiness!

“You know, Jackie? Normal people accept when their crush doesn’t like them back, or doesn’t like them anymore,” Prince Jack spoke softly, putting a firm compassionate hand on Jackie’s shoulder. “They don’t do this whole ‘sharing in on their happiness’ thing. Are you sure is not an act? A psychological defence mechanism? It’s not yours to share anyways. Frankly... it’s kinda creepy.”

Was that it? Truly? Was that all her feelings were about, when looked at with cold detachment? A response to feeling not good enough? Insecurity masquerading as selflessness?

“No, no, I don’t accept that!” Slave Jackie spoke. “I am happy that Marco likes Star. I genuinely truly feel that way. And yes, I would be sad if he didn’t like me anymore, or didn’t want to be with me anymore. But how much he likes Star and how much he likes me are two separate things! I can be happy about one, at the same time I am worried about the other. I can have gripes about some of the things Star does, and some of the things Marco says, without hating either of them, nor hating the way they love each other! It doesn’t mean that I was wrong to open up the relationship. This is who I am, how I chose to love. Not just Marco, but anyone whom I might love in the future. And yes, his happiness is mine to share... for as long as he wishes to share it with me!”

She tried to stand up then, and noticed the crushing force of her counterpart’s hand on her shoulder. She looked up. Prince Jack was still smiling, but his was a nasty cruel grin. He was still in armor, but it was black now, rather than golden, with pointed spikes sprouting from the dark metal. He was wearing not his own outfit, but that of Princess White.

“Sure, girl, keep telling yourself that,” Jack mocked her. She heard her own shoulder bone cracking. “You can pretend you are ok with them, that what you have now is all you ever wanted. But the reality is you wanted to win, you wanted to be the one that mattered the most. You are just lying to yourself. Masking insecurity as some noble code of ethics! You are no knight in shining armor. You are a farce and a wreck! You simply don’t fully realize it yet! Tomorrow, you’ll learn to see things my way…”

----

Jackie woke up then, crying. She looked up to see Marco. He was also weeping, quietly, as he leaned against the cell’s stone wall. Neither said a word as they hugged, hesitantly. Eventually, they fell again into an uneasy but dreamless sleep.

----

Janna could not fall asleep that night. She hardly had gotten any sleep last night, either.

Turns out that, when a horror of darkness and flame makes an attempt on your life, you are likely to feel somewhat jumpy for a time. It actually surprised her a smidgen that none of her friends had thought to check up on her regarding that. But she supposed that they all had their own traumas from that night, and their own concerns about the path ahead.

The witch knew she was ‘safe’ in Sam’s palace, as safe from any other threat as she was likely to be anywhere in the multiverse, and yet, she just couldn’t fall asleep. She was tired, and she was cranky, and she was mad at one particular mewman princess above all else. She was mad at Tom too, and mad at herself. But, well, first of all: Star.
The girl needed to put her thoughts in order. A lot had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

She jumped down from her mid-air lotus sitting position, wrapped her blood-stained cloak around herself, and headed out of the lonely room she had been left in. The whole place was a horror show, and yet, compared to the night before, she would almost describe her current situation as cozy. If not for the overwhelming rage, of course.

She was mad at Star, truly mad, since yesterday’s night. Mad. Not jealous. There was a difference. She had been jealous - envious, technically - for much longer, and that part was not really Star’s fault. She now understood that it was not the princess fault, now that she remembered the truth. But, regardless of that, after the attack of ‘will, unbending’, she was mad, fully and thoroughly furious. Rightly so too, as far as she could tell!

She had let Star know that she was mad at her as soon as the episode had ended. Janna had spoken even as the princess held the unresponsive body of Tom in her arms.

“Star! What in the name of all that’s unholy was that thing?!” she had shouted at the mewman, almost twenty-four hours ago.

As she remembered the words, Janna’s body tensed. She began walking faster and faster, along the twisting corridors of Sam’s infernal palace.

Star had struggled to explain herself, back then. Mostly, she’d defaulted to say that she wasn’t sure. It eventually came out she had apparently been seeing those evil green ghosts for a week, and yet neglected to tell anyone! Then, of course, one of those things eventually tried to kill her friends, because, well duh! Namely, it went after Janna herself.

Star had, in her defense, noted that Janna had called her for help, and that she had come, and that Janna would be dead if not for her, and why wasn’t she thankful? To which the witch had retorted that she would not have been in danger if not for Star in the first place, that both her and Tom almost did truly not make it out alive, and that, in the end, it had been Tom and not Star who defeated the threat. Apparently, whatever that thing was, it was after Star to begin with. But, at the same time, it wouldn’t hurt her, only her friends... which was great, really fucking great. Thank you oh so very much, Star!

Janna begun walking down a long set of stairs then. All along were floating black candles, the flames burning at the end were ocean blue, and permanently formed into the shapes of ghostly human skulls.

The princess had even brought up Midra’Apep last night. The snake monster had indeed been Janna’s fault and had, like Star’s green fire ghost, threatened the lives of others. Which ok, that was a fair point, but it wasn’t like Janna sat on the information for weeks, and not like she didn’t apologize about it many many times since! The thing yesterday, at any rate, was way more terrifying than any giant snake. They were, quite frankly, past making the mistake of not letting each other know about that kind of trouble!

Eventually, the whole argument had all degenerated into a shouting match. Star brought up her dead mom as if that absolved her of any fault. When Janna pointed out that was not really anything resembling an argument, the princess just threw a fit, climbed up the top of Tom’s hearse, and left the rest of them to deal with the fallout from her decisions, as usual. Star had, not too long ago, been her friend, and she was Marco’s and Jackie’s still. But it really rubbed Janna the wrong way how the princess seemed to assume friendship automatically implied that they should all risk their damn lives to help her get revenge for her dead mother!
The stairs ended, flowing out to a huge ballroom. It was outfitted with twelve long tables along the walls and a large empty space in the middle. The floor was a mosaic of marble and obsidian, representing scenes from a fight between winged beings. Angels and demons, it would seem, although some of the angels were depicted stabbing one another.

Tom had followed suit on that whole ‘risk his life for her sake’ deal, because he loved Star. He would love Star until she really did kill him. Meanwhile, Janna was just this... toy that he used to pass the time. But, well, wasn’t that their original deal? Maybe it was Janna’s fault for not waking up sooner, and getting the here away from him, and from Star, both. She sighed.

Janna always considered herself to be very much not a moron when it came to understanding other people’s hidden motives, their true thoughts behind whatever lies they told themselves. She suspected that, given the available evidence - that Tom had left their mutual room at 9pm, looking for Star, and that he was very much still not back by 4am - even a bona fide moron would figure out what had probably happened. If they hadn’t slept together, and they most likely had, they had at least gone to sleep together. A betrayal either way, as far as she was concerned.

The dark haired girl sat down on one of the chairs along the huge tables, in the head position. To her side was a velvet curtain, covering a gargantuan window. In front of the curtain was a small desk, and atop it, a large ornate porcelain vase of marvelous craftsmanship. It was adorned in gold and meticulously painted.

Then, of course, there was Princess Snow-bloody-White, and that only complicated things.

That afternoon, on the way here, Marco had mentioned having missing memories, and that sort of... made Janna uncomfortable. It took her a moment to realize that there seemed to be a hole in her memories as well, right around the time her feelings about Star became the most spiteful. A hole that seemed to coincide with the hour or so that she had spent waiting for Tom and Star to have their little chat in St O’s.

Earlier that same night, she had told Tom to leave her alone in the room for an hour or two. Partly, it had been to see what he did, to get it over with and done. He had been obsessing over Star since forever, bending over backwards to help her in her quest, going to Sam, despite his abject terror when it came to the older devil, all in order to help his dearest princess. And, well, last night, Star had jumped to hold him in between her arms. Honestly, Janna saw it coming a mile away, and the longer it took, the worse it was going to be for her.

But she had had a second motive for wanting Tom gone tonight in particular. She needed the quietness to go back into her own mind, to pull back what had been stolen from her: that hour of her memory. Eventually, she managed to recall the vampire’s transparent deception, and her insidious comments.

Janna would love to say it was her newly found skill in magic that allowed her to recover those sealed memories. In truth, it had been a more mundane sort of magic, one she knew even before she met Tom: self-hypnosis. She had managed to put herself in a trance-like state, and, after some effort, break through the block the vampire had put in her mind. It had been a humiliating, and bothersome, revelation. Mostly because now she understood her mind had been warped to put her against Star.

And yet, by cold slow logic, she still arrived at the conclusion that Star had knowingly put Janna’s own life in danger, that she and Tom were likely together now, in the middle of the night, and that she had reason enough to be mad at the princess with or without White’s interference. The problem was separating how mad she was supposed to be, from how mad she felt given the old vampire’s insidious mental suggestions. How much of her hate for Star was Janna’s own, and how much had
been forced on her?

Then again, White herself, or at least Janna’s encounter with her, was also Star’s fault. Hers, and that of Tom’s unhealthy obsession with his royal ex-girlfriend. If they hadn’t had to go to St O’s to look for Star, the troublemaker girl would never had met the vampire princess. So why not add ‘accidentally exposes friends to mind-rape’ to the list of charges against her former friend?

The evil princess had destroyed Janna’s remaining feelings of friendship towards Star. But did that make her biased against her former friend? Or did it just make her see the mewman’s actions more clearly for what they truly were?

“Sam!” Janna finally shouted, tired of walking around looking for the devil, “I know you are everywhere around this place! Show yourself... please.”

“Everywhere?” came the response immediately, and two bright gleaming stars appeared floating in mid air, on the other side of the table. Slowly, Sam’s entire form emerged from the shadows, and those bright points became his blinding blue eyes. “You flatter me, J-flame. Omnipresence is part of a skill set somewhat beyond my own.”

The witch made her best effort not to flinch as the devil manifested himself. Without answering just yet, Janna stood up, and walked slowly towards the nearby desk, as she pondered how to word her proposal.

She admired the vase atop said desk. It was a work of art, albeit one with terrifying implications: the edge around its opening was adorned in gold. The relief sculpted on the metal started abstract and geometric but, as parts of it flowed down the length of the piece, those shapes turned into winged humanoid figures. Eventually, the gold stopped, and painted china showed a different set of figures, beautiful and angelic near the top, but becoming ever more twisted and monstrous as they fell down the length of the vase. Yet, near the very bottom, stood one final perfectly angelic winged form, receiving the fallen with open arms.

“A representation of the fall, and the likeness of the Morning Star,” spoke Sam, following her gaze.

“Valuable?” Janna asked.

“Yes,” Sam agreed. “And no. Like all else.”

“Sam, can I ask a question?” she asked. “Does it violate your kind hospitality if I do so? Given it is a delicate question...”

She wasn’t sure that she being out at this hour, or having called him like she did, didn’t constitute a violation. But the fact that she was still alive seemed to hint that either it did not, or that the devil was waiting for an specific offense.

“You may ask all you like, J-flame,” Sam conceded generously. “Tonight, albeit not tomorrow, and with no guarantee of a response, of course. There is a question I am somewhat curious about, myself, and I think we both know I’ll see it answered soon.”

“Did Tom and Star...” Janna begun. She felt like a little girl for even asking, for wanting confirmation.

“They did,” Sam answered, with a smirk.

“How do I know...” she tried to find an out.
“I swear it,” Sam shrugged. “On the name of the Brightest Light of the Morning, I swear your fears are the truth, and the two of them have known each other tonight once more, in a rather biblical sense. They did so of their own free will, and in whichever way I might have foreseen or facilitated it, as you did foresee and facilitate it as well, I did not force them to do so. Now, Janna, knowing this for a fact, will you do what you came down here to do?”

She ran a finger along the edge of the vase. Clearly, Sam was ahead of her, as always. It shouldn’t even have surprised her anymore. “Don’t you know already what I am going to do? Didn’t you plan this from the start?”

Sam laughed at her nervous, sleep-deprived, yet hardly unfounded, paranoia. “J-flame, you and old Tommy boy have qualms with this world mainly because things often fail to turn out the way you expect them to. My usual complain, instead, is quite the opposite. For me, they very rarely turn out otherwise. But, I confess, I don’t know for a fact whether or not you are going to break that vase,” he pressed the tips of his fingers together, expectantly.

“If I do, what will happen?” Janna had to ask.

“Exactly what you suspect,” Sam replied calmly. “I’ll consider it a violation of my hospitality, and revoke my protection upon you all. After all, breaking my stuff was among the conditions you yourself named.”

“Then?” Janna pressed on, putting just the slightest pressure on the vase.

“I’ll do what you hope I’ll do. I’ll murder Star Butterfly,” he smiled ever so slightly. It was a friendly smile, almost warm, and the contrast between the words and the casual tone in which they were spoken only made it worse.

Janna hesitated. Hearing it stated in such unvarnished words made her feel almost scared of herself. But well, she knew why she had asked, and Sam knew too, apparently. Her hand didn’t leave the vase.

“And Tom?”

“I do consider Tom a friend, in as much as the concept makes sense given the difference between our natures,” Sam remarked. “He will be angry, and I might have to... dissuade him. But he will survive this plot of yours.”

Janna thought about asking about Marco and Jackie, but honestly, she was beyond caring. She also didn’t really need to ask about herself, except... “Will you kill me before or after Star?”

After all, what was the point if she wouldn’t live to see it? If she didn’t get to watch?

Sam seemed to think for a moment. Janna knew it was most likely a ruse, but she still had to wait patiently for his response.

“J-flame, let us make this whole thing more interesting,” Sam finally replied, in a cheerful tone. “I once promised to give you my fairest deal, and I shall do so once more: if you do this, I will not kill you. After Star dies, I’ll send you and your other two mortal friends back home. I’ll make it so they, and Tom as well, forget that she ever lived. All of you will be spared, all except the princess. You will be with Tom. But he will no longer have Star in his mind to compare you against. You will remember it all, or none of it, your choice.”

’I’ll give you everything you ever wanted, if you betray the friend that betrayed you, the one you already wish to enact revenge on, with all your heart,’ was the offer, in essence. No catch. No one
would know or remember. It would be between her and Sam, and if she ever felt bad about it, well, she could just as easily pretend to herself that Star had never existed in the first place. No one would contradict her. She could even get herself to forget doing this. Even her conscience would be none the wiser, if she so chose.

Janna didn’t even need to ask the devil why he was willing to give her that offer. She was sure it would amuse him to see her be the one to condemn her former friend, to know how twisted she really was, when no one else was watching.

“Finally,” Sam added, “know that I expect my hospitality to be breached before midnight tomorrow, no matter what you do tonight. When that happens, my protection is gone. The rest of the offer, however, is only for this moment, and for this specific transgression.”

So, essentially, if she didn’t do this, Star was almost certainly bound to die either way, and then, probably, so was Janna herself. Strictly speaking, taking Sam’s deal would lead to the best outcome for all. Janna would be saving Jackie and Marco, along with herself. Star was the one that had dragged them all to the mouth of the wolf, and she was doomed either way. By that logic, Janna was not only justified in her wish for revenge, she was actually being the hero.

Who was she kidding? That was a load of crap! It was not her real reason. It was not like she could not spot when she was lying to herself. Her wish in the matter was anything but noble. It was an ugly sick venomous thing, and yet...

She pressed further, and the bottom of the vase lifted from the wooden desk. She held onto the edge, as the whole thing came to balance on just a small corner of its base. She didn’t even need to push it now. If she simply let go, or if she tilted her grip slightly to the left or slightly to the right, the vase would tumble from its precarious perch. It would hit the ground, it would shatter, and soon after, so would Star.

Janna closed her eyes. The image of Star and Tom naked together, resting in bed, popped into her mind. But it wasn’t really about Tom. It wasn’t even about Star putting them all in danger, not if Janna was completely honest with herself. It was about power.

The demon prince himself had sworn, long ago, that Janna would never be able to match Star’s power. That Star would always win, not just in his heart but in the world at large. ‘You could spend your entire life practicing this sort of thing and you will never be able to call forth one tenth of the power Star could summon the second she got her magic wand. You are a regular human and she, well, she is something quite rare and quite extraordinary in this universe,’ had been his words.

Well, right now, in this instant, she could direct the course of powers greater than Star could comprehend. She could end her life, if she so wished! She could erase her memory from the minds of everyone! It was the most pure form of victory, the most definitive! She could win the game that Tom had said she would never even get to be a player in!

Janna pushed, and let go. The worst part was, the witch knew she was smiling as she did it, genuinely looking forward to seeing her former friend dead.

The vase fell fast towards the ground... 3... 2...

It held in mid air. Slowly, it floated back up, until it was once more atop its previous resting spot in the small wooden desk. Gently, Janna let go of her levitation spell.

“Thanks for the kind offer, Sam, but, well, no deal.”
She frowned as she sat back by the table. She should have felt so much better about having done the right thing, about knowing this about herself. That she was capable of honor, even when no one would see or know it had been her. In reality, she didn’t feel good about it. She had really considered going through with it. She knew Star, and now maybe all of them, might die tomorrow anyways, and the only consolation would be that she could claim it wasn’t her fault. Still, maybe that meant something nonetheless.

“Guess I am a better person than we both thought,” she mused. “Surprised?”

“J-flame, I have asked this question many many times before, and when I do, I really don’t know the answer ahead of time. How could I? When you yourselves know not,” Sam smirked, amused. “I have had those who took the deal, and I have had those who refused. A thousand times each. Neither answer is much of a surprise anymore, and neither ever changes anything of consequence, of course, but I’ll take whatever little amusement I can get. Refusing makes you no particularly noble, acceding doesn’t make you that much more villainous than just getting to the point of asking the question. But if you wish to think highly of yourself for this, then go ahead, it makes no difference to me.”

The girl frowned. Sam was right, of course. The fact that she considered doing a horrible deed and then decided in the last minute not to... well, it hardly made her a paragon of virtue. Then again, what would Star have done, if the roles had been reversed? If revenge for her mother’s death had been on the table as well? What would Tom have said, about trading Janna’s death for Star’s unconditional love?

“Is there a deal you can offer by which we all make it out of here unharmed?” Janna had to ask.

“You have it already,” Sam retorted. “Stick to my hospitality, and I will not, cannot, harm you.”

“But you expect we will fail to do so?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Janna sat there, in silence. She glanced back at the vase, at the depiction of the fall. Was Sam there? Among the angels, or among the monsters? Or was he something else altogether?

“J-flame,” Sam interrupted her thoughts. “There is another bargain we could strike, unrelated to the fate of your friends, or Star.”

She knew she shouldn’t ask, but… “What bargain?”

“Well, you want power, do you not?” he asked in return. “Power to match that of Star? And you can no longer rely on Tom to draw your magics from, amusing as your methods might have been to you, before.”

He paused for an instant, letting her ponder his words.

“What if I could find you an... alternative source? One all of your own?”

Chapter End Notes

Quick note: If anyone is following this fic at this point, but hasn't read A Habit Hard to Break, Well, I do recommend that fic to anyone reading SvtFoE fics, but before you
do, if you have a chance, please hop in the comments and let me know if the Marco flashbacks are still possible to follow without having read Habit? Not in the sense of catching every little reference (they are chock-full with references to that fic) but in the sense of getting the gist of what is happening and being at least as fun to read as the non-flashback scenes. If not, any details on what parts are too cryptic would be very appreciated.

**Coming up next:** Chapter 26: Always a Charade

*In which Sam's party takes place, masks must be worn at all costs, and the show, as they say, must go on, despite it all.*
Chapter 26: Always a Charade

“Dear devils, esteemed gentlefiends, I bid you welcome to my humble home,” boomed Sam’s voice through the grand ballroom. He didn’t appear to raise his tone, nor put any effort into talking louder or more forcefully than usual, yet the speech carried strong to each corner of the huge dance hall. “It is my honor and my pleasure to have each and everyone of you in attendance this evening.”

Tom looked around him, at the crowd gathered inside the ancient devil’s palace. They had been slowly marching into the place since as early as five in the afternoon. By now, there was barely enough space in the ballroom to hold them, for all that it was five times as large as that in his own castle.

It was a bizarre and intimidating congregation: demon kings and queens - masters over domains at least as vast as those of his own parents, and often far grander - sat along the twelve long tables by the walls. They wore an assortment of costumes. Most fit their wearer, at least somewhat: giant flame demons in medieval armor, tentacled inhuman horrors in long black cloaks, etc. Orcus, in all his sickening bulk, sat naked, while two masked succubi catered to his every whim. Her augustness, She-Who-Invites, to whom most gave almost as much of a wide berth as they did Sam himself, was wearing a simple shinto shrine maiden robe, white and red. If anyone had gotten to choose their own costume, it was her, but hers was power beyond the need for ostentatiousness.

On the other hand, there were also many others whose disguises seemed far less probable. An ancient lich wore a jester outfit. Mirage, The Great Deceiver, was dressed as a countryside priest. One of the Balrog Lords of Ghâshbûrz wore the garbs of a medieval plague doctor. Princess Nephafel was there too, dressed in an elementary school girl uniform. She looked utterly pissed at the fact and, under different circumstances, Tom would be delighted to see her annoyed so. But, right now, he was far too worried about what Sam’s game might be, and about what had happened last night, so he just hoped she hadn’t spotted him so far.

The dance floor was illuminated by a veritable galaxy of floating spheres of bright blue flame, high along the vault of the room, and by the shaky red glow of fire rising through the open windows. Standing on the marble and obsidian floor, whose mosaic represented the first of all wars, stood most of the attendants, those not important enough to get a seat by default. Apparently, that included Tom himself, despite his princely title, which meant Star and the three humans were surely also among that crowd, somewhere.

“As you all know, there are a few ground rules for this party. I am sure all of you will do your best to abide by them,” Sam continued. “First, none is to leave before midnight. I shall make another
It was seven now. Perhaps, if they held for five more hours, they would at least be allowed to retreat to their rooms and wait there, without that being in violation of their deal with Sam.

“Second, you must wear your costumes at all times, and represent your assigned persona to the best of your abilities,” the devil commanded. “If your card said courtesan, then you must whore; if it said assassin, then thou shall kill; and so on, and so forth...”

A large number of demons were certainly dressed as prostitutes, particularly among those standing, and an even larger number looked like dangerous killers. Then again, in the later case, sometimes it was hard teasing the disguise apart from the fact that they were indeed murderous fiends of the worst kind, by nature as well as nurture. Tom wondered what would be required from his own role as a scoundrel.

“... as for me,” Sam paused for a moment, “Until the clock strikes twelve, I shall be but a humble servant.”

The blue fires of his eyes suddenly went out. His blindingly golden hair faded into coal black. Two curled goat horns sprouted from his skull, and the marble white of his skin became a more muted pearl color. A black tux appeared atop his now frail thin body: a waiter’s uniform.

It was Adorjan.

Sam had become an identical copy of the head of staff at The Faust. The same old waiter that had attended Tom and Janna on their first date together, and had served the demon prince at the underworld restaurant within his family lands for centuries. Tom looked up, and saw the old goat demon smile back at him. No, not a copy. Sam had been Adorjan before, he had been Adorjan that night, he had perhaps always been Adorjan. Yet another charade from the bored lord of Dis. A chill went up the demon prince’s spine.

Before Tom could recover from the surprise, Adorjan - no, Sam - continued his address. “And one more thing, a final detail for all my honored guests to keep in mind...”

A spotlight shone over Tom, and he saw, among the crowd, four other spotlights come up in the middle of the marble and obsidian floor. He couldn’t see the people they illuminated, but he was sure those sitting around the room had a better view. He also knew that, if he were able to see past the sea of hats, wigs, horns, skulls, and monstrously tall bodies, he would see those lights trained on Star, Janna, Jackie, and Marco.

“... the Prince Lucitor and his mortal friends are under my personal protection. No harm will come to them by any hand other than my own. And I will stay my hand as well, if they follow the rules,” the devil concluded. “Now, with that said, please, enjoy your evening! Make sure to play your roles. I’ll be playing mine.”

Tom wasn’t sure if Sam had done them a favor by announcing his protection, or painted a target on their backs by hinting that they would be punished for any violation of protocol. Knowing who it was coming from, the demon prince had to suspect the later was the true intent. Either way, Tom had someone he needed to talk to.

“Oh, Thomas, darling, glad to finally see you attend one of these old things!” spoke a voice behind him.

He meant someone else. Hell, come to think about it, he meant anyone else!
“Hi Neph,” he replied. “Sorry, there is something I need to do. Perhaps we could catch up later?” Or, you know, never.

Nephafel smiled at him. It was a broad smile, one showing three rows of pointed razor-sharp teeth. The rest of her looked almost human, if you were willing to ignore the two bat wings behind her back and the pale lavender color of her demonic skin. Her black hair was tied into two pigtails, but that was probably only for the dumb schoolgirl costume. She usually wore it down.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw Marco and Jackie through the crowd. The boy was hurrying to get between his chain-bound girlfriend and an angry looking slime demon. The creature seemed to be pointing at the trail behind him, as it tried to shove a half-soiled rag at the human girl. It desisted, however, as soon as Marco pulled out his iron sword. That was slime demons for you in a nutshell, all bark and nauseating breath, but no real bite at all. Neph, unfortunately, was another matter. She did bite, in more ways than one. Tom knew that from first-hand, intimate, experience.

“But, Thomas, it has been so very long,” she pouted. Her bright red eyes followed his, finding the two humans. “Oh, so it is true, then? You are bringing mortals here?! Whatever for? Food? No, it can’t be, I remember you being quite… squeamish”

“Friends,” Tom corrected her. “Not that you would know the meaning of the word.”

Nephafel was not quite the most evil being Tom knew, but she was, without a doubt, the worst person. She was petty, scheming, volatile, and utterly selfish. She had been as much of a bad influence in his life as Star and her friends had been a positive one. Which, alright, didn’t make him and the mewman a well-behaved pair. But, by comparison...

“Friends?” the demon princess laughed. She glanced pointedly to the side. Tom followed her eyes to find Star.

The other princess was standing in line for drinks. She seemed to be yelling something at a pair of demons, no doubt fulfilling her assigned role as she bullied her way through the queue. Before Tom could make an excuse to head that way, Nephafel lifted her hand and ran her fingers through his neck, slowly caressing his rose tattoo. A rose, like Star’s transformed cheek marks. A fact that was not lost on the demoness, at all.

“Oh, Thomas, I think I know all about being ‘friends’ like that. I taught you all about being… friendly, if I remember correctly,” she mused, running a long red tongue through her inhuman teeth. “But mortals? Well, that’s a new one! Didn’t think you’d have it in you, Thomas, darling! You were never this adventurous back when we were dating…”

‘Dating’ was saying too much. Tom had danced with Nephafel at a few underworld balls before, and, well, a few times one thing led to another. After that, they had gone on dates, but it had always been ambiguous whether or not they were actually an item. They certainly had never been friends, let alone boyfriend and girlfriend. It was primarily a matter of trust, or, more precisely, total lack thereof.

She had pushed him into so many bad decisions. Bad decisions… like last night. But also some other stuff, stuff that was arguably even worse. Then, the moment he decided to push back, she had thrown him from eight hundred meters high into the bleak desert of the Pale Wastes. It hadn’t been the first time Neph screwed him over, and, he knew, if he wasn’t careful, it wouldn’t be the last.

“Nephafel, I…” Tom tried to extract himself out of the situation as painlessly as possible. On the one hand, given their last interaction, he wanted nothing to do with the demon princess. On the other, he wasn’t sure he could afford getting into her bad side right now.
Suddenly, he noticed Adorjan, Sam, walking their way. He carried a plate of eyes and crackers on one hand, and a long red napkin in the other. His expression was the utterly unreadable mask of professionalism Tom had come to associate with the old servant, before he knew who he truly was. It wasn’t out of the question that Sam could help Tom out a second time were Nephafel was concerned. However, something told the demon prince that such optimism would be grossly misplaced.

“Pardon me, sir, madam,” the devil interjected, with a deep servile bow. Tom had a brief moment of gratification when he saw that Nephafel was even more unnerved by Sam’s act than he himself was. She flinched. The Endless Shadow, one of the greatest powers in all of the hells, was serving them snacks. The notion itself an absurd pantomime all of its own.

Adorjan’s next words, however, reversed their moods, causing Tom to frown and the demon princess to grin. “I couldn’t help but overhearing. It would seem to me, though it is certainly not my place to judge, that a young girl being so forward and a true scoundrel being shy is not how this particular encounter should play out. Certainly I can’t imagine either of you would risk breaking character, especially not the Prince Lucitor...”

Tom sighed. ‘Play your part. Play your part or she dies’, and he obviously didn’t mean Neph!

He took a cracker from the plate Sam was offering, and ate it as he thought of his next move. It was, admittedly, somewhat viscous, but quite tasty. As he chewed on the globular morsel, an obvious strategy finally dawned on him. Screw not getting on Neph's bad side, it wasn't as if she really had many sides that weren't bad, after all. Tom affected his best look of gruff disinterest and tired distaste, before addressing the demon princess once again.

“Look, who my friends are is my own business, kid.” He emphasized the last word, savoring Nephafel’s look of irritation. She was technically his elder by almost a full thousand years. By demonic generations, they were peers. But him treating her like a child was a reversal of their usual dynamic. She loved to show herself as the more worldly of the two by far. “I am looking to chat with some ladies tonight, not change anyone's diapers, so get lost!”

Actually, perhaps being in character wasn’t going to be half bad, after all. The best part was that Neph couldn’t just call his bluff, without breaking character herself. Or so Tom thought.

“Aww, but siiiir,” she insisted in an exaggeratedly high-pitched voice. “All I want is one little dance. I can make it worth your while. Pretty please!”

She drew a finger to her mouth and sucked on it. Then, she tripped forward, or pretended to do so, and fell into Tom’s arms. By reflex, he caught her, just in time to see her smirk triumphantly.

With uncanny strength, the demon princess grabbed him by both arms and begun forcing Tom to dance, pulling him in reverse through the motions, pretending to follow but leading him on the sly. He could drop her now, if he truly tried, but not without revealing she had dragged him along. Would that count as breaking character?

For a few moments, he was forced into the awkward dance. Eventually, he began leading her normally, preferring that to the alternative of being moved around like a rag doll. Neph was only too happy to oblige. She relaxed her grip, albeit only slightly, when she thought he was no longer immediately planning to free himself.

They did a turn and then, behind Nephafel, Tom saw a girl in a black bloodied cloak staring at them: Janna. Her gaze was one of pure contempt, tinged with disappointment.
Crap! Talk about bad timing.

“Sorry, kid, but my date is here,” Tom forced himself to give something close to an in-character reason. Then, summoning all of his own strength, he managed to extract himself from the other demon’s grip. Before Nephafel could react, he ran towards Janna.

As he did, the witch retreated into the crowd. He pursued.

“Janna, wait! It’s not what you think!” he shouted. It was something a scoundrel would say too, so it was fine to shout it in public. Except, unlike the role he was meant to play, Tom really did mean it.

“And what do I think it was?” Janna’s question came from his left. He turned around quickly, instantly finding himself face to face with the human girl. It was strange, he never noticed her doubling back towards him.

“I... I don’t know,” Tom admitted. “But Neph is just an old pain in the ass, ok? I just couldn’t get rid of her.”

“Well,” Janna observed. “Didn’t seem that hard once you really tried. Maybe there is a lesson in there for me...” she mused.

“Wait, what?!” Tom asked, surprised, not sure he understood what the human girl meant. “She was forcing me to dance, Janna, really, there was nothing else going on there.”

“I saw that,” Janna shrugged. “I don’t give a rat ass about her, actually. But tell me, yesterday... was that nothing? Star... was she forcing you too?”

“Wait! You know?!” Tom went pale.

Janna’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s your reaction? Seriously?! Surprise that I found out?!” the troublemaker girl shook her head in disbelief. “I am not sure which is worse, Tom: what you two did, the fact that you would have been ok with keeping that a secret from me, or that you think I am so much of an idiot that you could ever have!”

Tom felt anger rise within him. He wasn’t going to be berated like this. After all, it was not like he and the girl ever agreed they were going steady or anything of the sort. Actually, him getting it on with Star had been the plan from the beginning; her plan. “Janna, wait a minute! That was our deal! Remember? You knew I wanted Star. You said you would help me get her, right? That we would be dating until I had a chance to get Star back!”

“Right...” Janna replied, coldly. Around them, the crowd started parting, a lot of eyes on them. “...yes, I did say that.”

“And ok, maybe along the way it became a little bit more than that,” Tom explained. “A lot more than that, ok? But is not like I ever promised you anything different, is it? You knew what the deal was! You set those terms! I did nothing wrong!”

“Oh, sure, Tom, you are absolutely right! You did exactly what you promised! What you always wanted!” she shouted. Her fists were clenched. There was something in her left index finger. Blood? A cut? No, not quite, it looked like the tattoo of a ring, except only half of the way around, like a crescent moon. “Congratulations then! Mission fucking accomplished! Hope it was worth it... because you are right, you don’t owe me shit. The thing is, that one goes both ways, Tom... I
also don’t owe you a damn thing!”

She took a deep breath.

“You know? The funny thing is that, maybe, if that had been the first thing you told me, that our deal had worked, well, I wouldn’t be happy, perhaps, but I could understand,” she added. “But that’s not what happened. You were fine with keeping me in the dark, if you could. That doesn’t make me a partner in a scheme, fucked up and outdated as that scheme might have been... It makes me the goddamn mark! That’s not a role I’ll accept, Tom. I am done with you. And you know what? I think so is Star.”

Sam was right, the costume fit. It seemed playing his part had been no challenge at all.

Janna turned around. Tom felt sick. He hadn’t realized it, but what he had said before was true, his relationship with Janna had become a lot more than a game for him long ago. It wasn’t the last thing she said that was the most hurtful, even if she meant it to be. He was fine with Star not being his, he was fine with it having only been a one night thing. But this, this he didn’t want. It was not the trade he’d meant to make. Once more, he’d messed up, badly.

“Janna, wait! I am s...”

But she was no longer there. In an instant, Janna’s cloaked figure had become translucent, and then dissolved like a fading shadow. Tom blinked. She had probably displaced herself to somewhere else within the room, or had made herself invisible. She was far too smart to leave and let Sam win that way. Either way, Tom didn’t think she could do something like that yet. Hell, he didn’t think she would master magics like those for another fifty years, if ever. He himself couldn’t do that outside of his own domain. He didn’t know if Star could.

Even stranger, was the fact that he hadn’t felt her taking the necessary power from him. The other guests, perhaps? It was an extraordinarily magically saturated environment, after all.

In any case, Janna had vanished, and whether she was still in the room or not, Tom knew that searching for her would be futile.

----

Well, it was a hell of a crowd. And yet, in a way, it was tamer than Star had imagined it to be. Yes, ok, there were a few naked demons wearing carnival masks, of at least two different genders, and not always a single one each. And yes, some of them had rather extreme anatomies, and a handful were even making use of them in ways that she dared not observe for long. But, honestly, she had sort of expected that to be a lot more common given that it was hell and Tom had described Sam’s parties as ‘intense’ even by infernal standards. And ok, sure, there was a huge hairy creature laying in a pool of blood in the corner of the dance room, probably because somebody was doing good on one of those assassin roles. But, then again, that also happened with some regularity at Star’s family reunions. By and large, most attendants were dressed as if for a normal costume party, more Halloween Night than ‘demonic orgy of sin and debauchery’.

Not saying she was disappointed or anything. It was a good thing that this didn’t live up to her worst nightmares. But, still, she had expected to be more shocked.

“Out of my way, you imbecile!” she commanded once more, and a huge stone gargoyle in chains moved to let her finally get to the drinks.

She smiled. It was part of staying in costume after all, nothing she could do about it. She had to do
it anyways to remain on Sam’s good side. Her gown didn’t particularly fill her with a sense of kindness towards those beneath, so being too polite might actually have been dangerous to her and her friends. And, well, if she really had to be bad, if there was no choice in the matter, then she might as well enjoy it! Guilt was overrated, after all.

“Hey, Star, there you are!” shouted Marco, walking towards her in long strides. He was frowning.

Behind him, Jackie shuffled painfully, dragging her own chains behind, looking down. Every so often, Marco glanced back at some of the patrons looking the human girl’s way, and gave them a quick peek at the blade of his otherwise sheathed sword. His expression was that of someone not to mess with. Star assumed it was mostly the effect of the Champion costume. Still, once their eyes met, she couldn’t help but get the distinct impression that Marco seemed thoroughly pissed at her in particular.

She gulped. It was hard seeing Marco right now, after last night, particularly when he held so much fire in his gaze. It made her feel... that one emotion that was pointless. She would have to tell them about last night, sooner or later. It was the right thing to do. But now it was not the time. How could she apologize to him and Jackie, and still keep her role? How could they say their piece in response, and still keep theirs?

Well, if either way she had to fix it later, then what was the point in agonizing about it? Better not to tell them just yet, and not let pointless guilt show.

“Hey Marco, Jackie! Want any drinks?” she smiled at them. Then, lowering her voice to a whisper. “All going well with, you know, the slave bullshit? Anything I can do to help?”

“I...,” Marco begun replying. Jackie just nodded. He took that as his cue to continue. “We are managing. My role helps. I think the really scary ones heard Sam and are not getting themselves involved in his game, and the rest back off when threatened.”

“Good, good... well, let me know if you need help with the threats...” Star mussed. She downed a glass of some red liquid she had first assumed was wine. It didn’t taste like grapes, or alcoholic. It just tasted sort of metallic. Ugh. Not pleasant at all.

“But, Star, there is something we wanted to ask...” he begun.

“Look, Marco, does it need to be now?” Star interrupted him. There was a lot she needed to talk to them about. Not only last night, but also her dream, and what she had decided because of it. Still, all of that would have to wait. “We need to be careful, Marco. Our roles...”

“Star, this is sort of important...” Marco insisted. “It’s about... well, I guess you could say it’s about the spell, the link, or whatever you want to call it...”

Star sighed, exasperated. Did he really need to bring that up again now? She knew the costume was influencing her, but, well, didn’t Marco get it? They literally couldn’t have an honest conversation about anything right now. What could she say? That she was sorry about spying on them? First of all, she had already apologized, many times! And, second, she wasn’t sure giving any apologies would match her role tonight. So why the here ask for one now?

A three-headed cyclops, with a single eye in the middle head and huge foaming circular maws occupying the entirety of the other two, stumbled onto the edge of the small table. A dozen glasses fell to the ground, breaking and spilling their contents. The monster grunted. The left head bellowed, baring its sharp knife-long fangs as it spoke, “you! Slave girl! Clean this mess!”
Marco began to move his hand towards the sword, but Jackie pulled at his arm, and shook her head. She whispered something into Marco’s ear, then moved towards the table and grabbed a large cotton napkin. She knelt towards the floor, with some trouble due to the shackles around her feet, and begun cleaning the spill. The three-headed creature nodded satisfied and began stumbling away.

“Why?” Star asked Marco, genuinely confused.

“She said,” the boy muttered, angrily gritting his teeth. “She said that we all have to play our roles at least somewhat, and that this was an easy one to tackle… She also said you have to play yours.”

“So, then you understand why I can’t talk to you right now, right, Marco?” she had intended it to be apologetic. But the tone came out a haughty sneer.

Something was going on with them tonight, with the costumes. Were the instincts embedded in their magics stronger during the party? Or was it just the effect of wearing them for so long? Or simply how well they aligned with their current mental state?

“Look, I know we probably still have to talk about the scrying spell some more,” she sighed. “But right now is obviously not the time.”

“And, I assume, it would also not be the time to talk about anything else you might have done recently that we might have a problem with?” asked the boy angrily.

“Exactly! Unless you think that’s something ‘The Countess’ would owe ‘The Champion’ an explanation for,” retorted Star exasperated. Didn’t he get it? “Look, whatever it is, we can talk later, Marco, when we can actually talk, you know, like ourselves! For now, let’s just stick to the stupid roles instead.”

“Understood, Lady Star,” he highlighted the title, addressing her as a countess, albeit using the wrong part of her name. Not that she cared to correct him. She imagined he was making a point of talking to her not as a princess, and definitely not as his girlfriend or his best friend. “But, just so you know: we know about last night. About Tom, I mean. So, I guess I’d be interested in what you think you owe telling us about that, when you are, you know, able to act like yourself... assuming this really isn’t yourself right now.”

Star’s eyes went wide. They knew? How? Why? Oh, right... the link! That’s why he had brought it up. Marco must have seen her.

Oh god! Marco had seen her. Her and Tom!

“Ahem,” she heard Sam cough behind her. Star turned around to see him smiling, in his new goat-like appearance, silently offering her another glass of whatever the hell it was they were drinking. Blood, probably.

She sighed, and glared at him, which luckily was perfectly in character. The devil kept toying with them. It would have been the easiest thing for him to let them fail this little charade then and there, but he had stopped her from breaking her role, at the cost of forcing her to do something she didn’t want to do.

She addressed Marco. “I believe we can discuss this another time. For now, the party must go on, and I’d rather be on my own. I believe that would be the best for all of us.”
She tried to convey, with her eyes, what she would have said if she was free to speak her mind. That she was sorry. That it had been a mistake. The she understood if it meant the end. But that, right now, their lives were at stake, and that the longer they remained around one another, the higher the chance that all their masks would crumble.

He seemed hurt, but he nodded right back in understanding. He and Jackie begun walking away from her. It hurt, a lot. Well, better get used to that, because once their three nights at Sam’s place were done, she planned to send them both away, permanently.

Sam had said it himself, in the dream, if it had truly been a dream: feeling guilty was useless. If all she could do was to keep hurting them, to keep putting them in danger, then feeling bad after the fact didn’t help. She needed them to go back to Earth, to leave her alone, for their own good. In a way, the Tom thing should make it much easier. If Marco and Jackie hated her for it, then it would be easier to convince them to turn back, to let her take the rest of the road alone. Still, she felt... irritated. Yeah, let’s go with irritated.

“So, you are Thomas new ‘friend’?” said an even more irritating voice. It belonged to this winged lavender-skinned demon in a school girl uniform, with more teeth than fucking Toffee crossed with a hair comb. “Can you spell ‘downgrade’?”

Star scoffed. Trying to ignore the stranger. She didn’t seem like a threat, and the least people she talked to at this party, the least chances she had to break their stupid deal with Sam.

“The name is Nephafel, by the way, Princess Nephafel Gibborim,” she kept at it. “A bow is preferred, but a scream of terror would be fine too. Maybe Thomas mentioned me? I am her ex. I mean, his original ex.”

Star smirked, and answered truthfully “He never said a word about you.”

“Oh, well,” Nephafel shrugged. “He should have!”

She jumped at Star then, the middle finger of her right hand extending until it was as long as a spear. Its sharp tip lounged towards Star’s chest.

It hit a solid barrier of bright violet magical energy.

“Ugh,” the demoness exclaimed. “Sam’s protection?”

“No,” Star corrected her. Pulling her wand from inside her purple gown. “My own. Just like this...”

She took aim.

“GLOWING DARKNESS HELLBLAST!” she shouted. A thin beam of blinding violet light emerged from it. It hit the demon princess’ leg.

Star smiled as Nephafel yelled in pain. This was just what she needed after that exchange with Marco, after the decision that had hatched inside her heart. If all she was meant to do was hurt, then she would hurt those who deserved it. She smelled the demon girl’s flesh burning as the beam continued steady out of her wand, piecing all the way through skin, muscle, and bone. Slowly, she moved it further and further up the limb.

“Wait! What are you doing?” Nephafel cried. “You... you can’t do this! You are bound by Sam’s hospitality, those are the rules! Argh!”

“Oh, but I am following the rules,” Star observed. “I am just playing my role. You should have
asked what it was, I think, before you tried to attack me. Turns out that, tonight, I have to pretend to be the kind of bitch you probably are.”

Internally, Star was surprised at her own words. At the same time, saying that felt better than she cared to admit. Star had never craved power over others. The amount she had by virtue of her birth was burden enough already. But this act let her feel in control of herself, of her own pain, able to direct it intentionally against a foe rather than having it explode around her friends. It was also a much needed victory, after her defeat against her mom’s killer, and her feelings of impotence when it came to dealing with Sam’s games.

She looked around, most of the other guests were looking at the two of them indifferently. In fact, there were three or four other fights in progress around them, along with at least five separate ongoing sexual acts, and a dozen other events that would normally count as extreme displays of one sort or another. Yet, the vast majority of the people dancing or talking paid no attention. Sam himself was elsewhere, carrying a few larger trays of food and placing them on the tables around them. He was whistling.

Her beam reached past the girl’s knee and Star begun to grow bored with her screams. With a swift movement, she cut horizontally, both severing the leg at that height and cauterizing the wound in one shot. “Fine, that was enough. You can go now. I meant it when I said I have never heard of you before, and I better not hear of you again. Deal?”

Nephafel scrambled away on all three. If she was anything like Tom, her leg would grow again. Either way, it was not Star’s problem. The demon princess had tried to kill her, after all. She deserved it, and it had been... relaxing.

----

Jackie’s first visit to Tom’s hell, and her meeting with the green ghost of Queen Moon, had been humbling and violent. The road to Sam’s place had been eerie and haunting. As she tried to fall asleep last night, she had heard the screams outside in the night: blood-curling howls from the burning city below. She had also met their host yesterday, who in theory was the scariest thing around, and she had no trouble believing that claim, despite his occasional fake playfulness. She had faced all that with her chin held high. Yet, now, she was truly terrified.

The room was full of bizarre inchoate monstrosities, animated corpses, and huge red winged demons. There was a two-and-a-half meters tall walking skeleton in a harlequin dress that seemed to lower the room temperature a full five degrees all around it wherever it went. The snacks were eyes, the drinks seemed to be blood. A fat red demon with goat legs and a goat skull for a face, was sitting on a huge chair, jerking himself off, while two winged demon ladies in carnival masks danced in front of him. There was the corpse of something that looked like a four-horned minotaur sprawled on a corner, and she could have sworn he had been alive when the party started. How was nobody else unnerved by this? How could Star and Marco still act so... so... so unfazed?

The worst part was the way some of the nightmarish creatures looked at her, at her small form dragging chains around. In some eyes, she saw lust, and that was chilling enough. But the appetites she saw on some of the inhuman eyes that followed her made her sick to her core. She could tell who wanted to hurt her, and who wanted to eat her like a pig or a chicken, and who wanted to break her so thoroughly that death would be a welcome release. Somehow, she knew. And she knew that if they asked, she would feel the need to obey.

Most of the guests simply treated her like a servant, asking her to clean things or fetch them food. She tried to do those tasks, to keep her role as best she could. It helped that she truly felt good serving, felt useful. A voice in her mind recoiled at the idea, yelled at her that it was wrong,
humiliating. But as a practical matter, she was ok with handling the easy stuff. Whenever any of the fiends asked for something more, she relied on Marco to keep them at bay. Some of the requests were gross, or dangerous, and a few were of a disturbingly sexual nature. Those were handled by the boy, with a stern look and a glimpse of an iron edge.

She was surprised, and a bit awed, that Marco had turned such an effective bodyguard. Sam’s announcement that they were under his protection, and the fact that Star had apparently mutilated someone earlier that night, certainly helped make the creatures around them take the human boy seriously. But it also helped that it didn’t feel like a bluff. He seemed genuinely fearless, and ready to exact bloody violence on anyone or anything that didn’t back down from his irate glare.

At first, she had felt worried that something wasn’t right. That wasn’t how Marco acted, not even how he had acted last night. Jackie was grateful for him keeping guard over her, but at the same time couldn’t help but feel unnerved by his behavior. He seemed different, rougher, angrier. It was not like him: Marco was thoughtful, and analytical, and not the least bit likely to strut around playing Conan the Barbarian in a room full of demons, striding ahead as she followed him meekly shuffling in chains. If anything, Jackie was usually the more confident one, the one who was brave almost to the point of foolishness... sometimes way past it.

It dawned on her, earlier in the night, that she also wasn’t acting like herself. She was following her role, dragging herself around like a broken person. Somehow, on some level, the roles they were meant to play were more than just disguises, something was messing with their minds. Anger rose within her, she stood a little bit higher, held a wolf beast’s gaze with her own defiant one, and, then, realizing the problem, looked back down towards the floor.

Following her role was exactly what she needed to do. If she tried to be brave, she’d be breaking their deal with Sam. She had to let herself be cowed, be afraid, and let Marco (and Star) keep her safe. But was that just the logical choice? Or was that her role speaking? Or was it like Prince Jack had told her? That she was really, deep down, just that much of a coward?

As the hours ran by, she became more at ease with her temporary misfortune. More and more of the monsters learned what they would and wouldn’t tolerate, which also meant less unreasonable requests.

Still, she felt tired, and hungry. It was now past eleven, and she had not dared eat a thing from this infernal buffet. Marco had taken a few disgusted bites off a drumstick of meat that fortunately seemed too large to be human, but was also raw and bloody. She had not been quite as brave. Then again, a few more minutes, maybe just half-an-hour, and Sam would do his midnight address. After that, they’d leave the party and the nightmare would be mostly over.

So far, it seemed like all five of them were holding their end of the bargain, including herself. Maybe she wasn’t playing the role she would have wanted to play, but they were still winning. Weren’t they?

Deep in thought as she was, Jackie almost tripped on the dead body in front of her. ‘Dead body’, she supposed. It was a clean skeleton, devoid of flesh but wearing a bullfighter outfit. The bones themselves, however, were fractured and splintered, and there was no bright magical glow in the eyes of its cracked skull. An undead creature, rendered merely dead at a much more recent time.

Besides the remains, laid a sharp looking dagger, lodged into the marble of the floor itself. Its hilt was also in the shape of a skull, with sapphire encrusted eyes and a twelve-pointed ring of thorns carved into its forehead.

“Zzlave,” she heard a clicking echoing voice behind her, as a hard cold hand wrapped around her
wrist. “We zshall mate.”

She turned around to see the most hideous creature she had yet seen that night. Its lower body was that of a centipede the size of a horse. From it grew a human torso, albeit one covered in a sort of black carapace, not unlike that of a cockroach. Its mouth was also insectoid, with clicking external mandibles that rattle as it spoke, while the rest of the face was vaguely humanoid, but only in the broadest sense. Instead of hair, it had a mass of sprouting white maggots, which slowly dripped into the floor.

Jackie yelled as she pulled away from the monster. A second later, with a gleam of iron, Marco’s sword came down between the two of them, forcing the horror to pull back its hand.

----


He knew the creature would back down. He would make it back down.

Yes, the place was filled with bloodthirsty monsters, and he was not a fool to pick unnecessary fights, but if any of them forced the issue when it came to Jackie, he was ready. He had fought monsters before, with Star, and even more while chasing Hekapoo across half-forgotten kingdoms. Scary things were afraid of him. He had been ready for a fight since the beginning of this hellish party. He felt his blood boil at every step, his muscles tense every time that a creature held his gaze. He welcomed the sport! But so far, no being had taken him on his offer, made him make good on his threat.

It was like it had been back in Ennio, except he hadn’t yet been forced to demonstrate a thing. So far, they had all backed down.

“No.”

The creature pulled its hand back but, at the same time, it rose on its lower centipede body, until it towered twice Marco’s height.


Marco lunged forward with his iron sword, slashing against the beast torso. Eight legs out of ten times as many held onto his blade, yanking it away from its hand.

By reflex, Marco brought his hands up in front of him, and begun a sequence of twelve gestures and twelve words in the Ancient Tongue. He had been holding out on using the Fierceness Ritual. He wasn’t sure what effects it would have on his mind when the costume alone was already goading him into aggression. Well, it seemed like this beast was about to find out.

Before he could complete the ritual, however, the monster tackled him, throwing him to the ground, breaking the sequence. It launched itself towards Jackie, too fast for Marco to respond.

----

Jackie saw Marco attack the creature, and the creature counter-attack. She saw Marco fall to the ground. She saw the gleam of the skull dagger near her and reflexively drew herself low to grab it. She hid it behind her back, as the creature lunged at her.

Marco’s sword had been caught in the monster’s appendages because it was large, and heavy, and
slow, and it had swung in a wide slashing motion. The dagger was small and quick, and all Jackie had to do was wait until the insect abomination was close enough to her, and thrust the point against its chest. The blade would kill it, she knew. Somehow she knew it with absolute certainty.

A bell tolled somewhere, but to Jackie it felt distant. It didn’t matter. Marco was still in the floor, out of breath. Not unconscious, but not able to get back up on time. Even if he did, he was unarmed. It was up to her.

A bell tolled. Behind the monster, Sam, in his waiter attire, stood expectantly.

Time seemed to slow down, like it had during her fight with Princess White. The creature lunged at Jackie in slow motion. She could certainly murder it, avoid a fate worse than death. She wanted that foul beast nowhere near her.

A bell tolled. Sam smiled.

But she was a slave. She was supposed to be a slave. To serve. She was not the champion, that had been Marco’s role.

A bell tolled. A raised eyebrow from their host.

If she fought, that might violate Sam’s hospitality. That was why time flowed slowly, to give her the chance to act.

A bell tolled.

But if she did, if she fought her assailant, that would break her role and then, not only her, but all of them, would suffer.

A bell tolled.

Tom and Janna. Star. Marco. She could not let Marco get hurt. No matter what, not even if he loved Star more than her.

A bell tolled.

He had tried to protect her. He kept her safe all the rest of the night, and even if he had failed this one time, she still wanted to do her best to protect him in return.

A bell tolled.

Even if it meant torment. Even if it meant hell.

A bell tolled.

The creature was now upon her, a second longer and the decision would no longer be hers.

A bell tolled.

Horror overwhelmed Jackie’s mind. She closed her eyes, preparing herself for the worst. She dropped the blade.

A bell tolled.

A cry of agony forced Jackie’s eyes back open, just in time to see a piercing bright violet ray crisscross the monster’s carapace. The creature felt backwards, burnt and eviscerated. With tearful
eyes, Jackie looked back to see Star pointing her wand at the remains of the insect-like horror. The princess looked appropriately murderous in her fury.

A bell tolled. Then, a long silence.

Jackie realized that Star was glaring past the monster’s corpse now, directly at Sam. The devil was back in his original form of glowing blue eyes and burning golden hair.

The human girl was vaguely aware that the time around them had begun moving normally, and she was probably perceiving it at the same speed as everyone else now. If anything, she was the one who felt slow. She new, on some level, that she was in shock.

“Devils and gentlefiends, that was the twelfth bell. It is now midnight,” Sam spoke to the room, unconcerned, as he walked towards Jackie. “It is now midnight, and the charade is ended. I am afraid to say, that, in the last minute, one of my five guests of honor has delivered me a great insult, by breaking her role.”

“What?!” Star shouted. “I didn’t! I am pretty sure what I just did fits my role perfectly. But, you know what? If it didn’t, I would have done it anyways! No way I am letting that thing hurt one of my best friends!”

“Princess Star, you are not who I meant.” Sam knelt down besides Jackie and picked up the dagger. He turned to address her, pointing the tip of the weapon carelessly towards her face. “You. You broke your role.”

“W...w...” Jackie tried to talk, but the shock of the last few minutes was still too much, as was the creeping realization that they were all doomed, and somehow, despite what she had been ready to do, to accept, it was still her fault.

“I gave you the tool to kill him,” Sam remarked, as he stood back up. “I gave you time to decide. I gave you the knowledge that you would win. You didn’t raise your hand against an unbearable fate. Why?”

Slowly, Marco was beginning to get back up. She also saw that Tom was making his way towards them. Suddenly, Janna seemed to pop out of thin air right ahead of him.

“B... because,” Jackie muttered. “Because of my role... because I was a slave... so, so... so you are wrong, I didn’t break the deal, I kept my role. I swear it. I was even ready to... to...”

“Ah, but you see, child, that was not your role,” he spoke. Suddenly, his smile was not one of amusement. There was only one emotion in the devil’s face, a gelid cruelty, an utter malevolence. Slowly, those among the eldest and most powerful of the guests began vanishing, making their own ways out of Sam’s domain after the designated hour. Those who weren’t quite as powerful, but were smart, scrambled for the doors. Even Nephafel ran for her life. “What is the role of a slave, if not rebellion?”

“You...” spoke a voice behind her, almost bursting with barely restrained fury. It broke through the dazed coldness she was slowly sinking into.

Jackie turned around to see Star pointing her wand straight at Sam.

“... you monumentally unfair asshole!!” shouted the princess.

“And now, princess Butterfly, you too have directly insulted me,” he remarked, “and you have raised your hand against me, as well. By your friend’s actions, or by yours, I am free of our
bargain. Consider my protection withdrawn."

The walls around them begun to crack apart, the ceiling exploded into a cloud of dust, falling upwards towards the sky. The spheres of blue flame, which used to be trapped below the hall’s vault, let out a long wailing sound and flew away, to join their siblings in the aurora of souls of the now exposed sky.

Sam’s body rose up into the air. It lit up with blinding azure splendor. The demons and aberrations dumb enough, or unlucky enough, to have remained in the room burned to dust under the brightness of his light. Star lifted her wand, just in time, and a glittering purple magical bubble appeared around the five of them. It shook and wavered under the stress, but, for now, it held.

“Any last words?” boomed a voice like a thousand brass bells.

Chapter End Notes

**Coming up next:** Chapter 27: And then Oblivion?
Chapter Summary

In which she dies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 27: And then Oblivion?

Sam’s azure fiery glow illuminated the entirety of the visible world beyond Star’s magic barrier. In the presence of his unearthly fire, midnight was as bright as dawn, not with the life giving light of the sun, but with the cruel brightness of a much less hospitable celestial body. And it was one with a malevolent will of its own. There was something about the way Sam looked, surrounded by this bright blue otherworldly light, that made Star’s mind recoil in instinctive terror. She perceived something, just below the threshold of comprehension, that reminded her of the frailty of all living things.

To say Star was afraid would have been an understatement, and yet, in the face of inevitability, she was not cowed. She knew she would never match the devil’s might, and he had repeatedly proved that he could outsmart any of them. But maybe, just maybe, she could still take him by surprise, strike him before he expected her to do so. There was always the possibility of being underestimated. In any case, she won nothing by waiting for him to attack first. She was not playing this defensively! She was not waiting for death to come her way!

She jumped and rolled out of her protective magical bubble as fast as she could, leaving her friends safe behind the shimmering shield. The floor reflected the horrific blue light of their host back at her stinging eyes.

“GLOWING DARKNESS HELLBLAST!” cried Star, as she sprung back on her feet. She pointed her wand directly at Sam’s face, summoning forth the cutting blast of focused violet light she had used against Princess Nephafel. She targeted her foe with a destructive brightness much like his own.

Sam was not surprised. He moved his right arm fast, so fast that Star couldn’t see it, fast enough to hit the incoming beam with the back of his hand. He slapped the spell away. The magical ray broke into pieces, as if it were made, not of pure light, but of solid and rather fragile glass. After shattering so, no more energy flowed from Star’s wand, the spell fully negated and, perhaps, forever undone. It made no sense, not according to the laws of physics she had learned on Earth, not according to those of magic which she read from Eclipsa’s notebook. Yet it was so.

The devil stared at the princess, fixing on her a gaze so intense that it literally burned. Star jumped away just as the air around her ignited in an explosion of blue flames. No beams, no incantation, no need for movements or gestures, Sam had but to direct his attention to cause the empty air to catch fire. He trailed her with his sight, and as she ran from it, blaze and lightning followed in pursuit. Bits and pieces of the ancient mosaic under her feet flew through the air as his sight slid through the floor. The roof was long gone, and the remains of the walls simply crumbled as Sam’s gaze
touched upon them. She was scrambling for dear life and the being in front of her hadn’t so much as taken a step in her direction. He simply glared towards her. His eyes alone brought destruction.

“DEVOURING HORRORS HELL SWARM!!” Star shouted. A mass of black inchoate tentacles launched themselves at the Endless Shadow. They burned to ashes before they could touch his skin.

“DOBHAR-CHU BLAST!!”

“THESTRAL CHARGE!!”

The darker versions of her old favorite spells suffered the same fate. Monstrous lutrinae and demonic horses cried in agony as they burned to death. The Lord of Dis hardly seemed to notice her efforts.

Star tried a few more spells, while still evading their host’s sight. She knew it was but an act of desperation. Beams dissolved before touching him, summoned weapons melted, creatures burst into flames under the azure light. Her older rainbows, cupcakes, and inexplicable explosions fizzled out before she could even finish casting them, going against a tremendous magical pressure that far exceeded the power of such paltry spells. After her first attempt, the devil hadn’t so much as deigned to lift a hand to defend himself. Instead, the infernal power slowly radiating from his eyes and body undid most anything she could throw at him.

“This is beyond disappointing, princess,” boomed Sam, his voice the unfeeling fury of brass bells. “I must say, I was still hoping for so much more than this sorry collection of third rate parlor tricks...”

He pointed his open palm at Star, then closed it violently. A mass of portals, not unlike those formerly created by the now inert dimensional scissors, if perhaps smaller, opened all around the mewman. Out of each portal emerged an intense beam of cerulean light. They formed into a swarm of blindingly bright spectral twisting claws. They seemed to grab, not at her, but at her layers of magical protection, tearing them down one by one. She felt her unshielded skin crawl with searing pain under their host’s burning light, as soon as her defenses were removed. Star fell down to her knees, weakened and hurt.

The portals vanished. Sam stood, immobile, expectant. His brightness dimmed ever so slightly, just below the point at which Star herself, now unprotected, would have soon burst into flames. It still hurt her eyes, and slowly blistered her skin.

“W...why?” she asked, struggling to regain her breath. “If you are truly going to kill me, you could have done it already! What the hell are you waiting for?!!”

“For you to show me something new, anything that proves you can already do what I need you to do,” he replied. “It would avoid us both the inconvenience of your death, and grant me the satisfaction of one rare surprise. Alas, I fear I might be prolonging this in vain.”

Right. He was toying with her, testing her for something. The problem was, Star didn’t know for what. On the one hand, it was beyond humiliating. On the other, it meant there was a way out! She didn’t need to defeat Sam, she just needed to find a way to solve yet another of his cruel mind games, to figure out what he wanted to see. But how? Maybe, maybe if she had a moment to think... wait, that was it!

“From darkness deep and fires far, I call on time to flow like tar!” she recited.
She didn’t see what she could do that would pacify the powerful being, but perhaps this would buy her some time. She only hoped he wouldn’t be able to follow her into slowed time, like Toffee’s phantasm had. She was beginning to suspect that, fortunately for her now, the only reason that had happened back then was because there was some connection between ‘will, unbending’ and the wand. Perhaps a connection to herself. Maybe, just maybe, Sam would simply freeze. Then she could figure out, at worst, an escape plan.

“No, that won’t do,” he said simply, raising his left hand. He extended three fingers, from middle to thumb, keeping the others closed upon his palm. A twisted gesture of benediction.

The princess felt something other than her own magic tug at the flow of time, canceling her own pull on it. She glanced back at Marco, Jackie, Janna and Tom. None of them seemed frozen. As they looked at the scene in front of them through the bubble, they were paralyzed by terror and held back by her own barrier, but not fundamentally immobile. In the sky above them, the maelstrom of souls continued to turn.

“It wouldn’t have worked the way you wished for, either way,” Sam explained, “But I am afraid I want them to see this. For what it’s worth, that was indeed an improvement.”

An improvement? Why? Because time manipulation was a harder feat to accomplish? Because it was a more powerful spell? Or maybe, he meant it was cleverer than her approach so far? No, none of that sounded like the kind of thing the Lord of Dis cared about.

There was another difference, between that spell and the previous two. The later was dark magic. It was a spell based on the principles of Eclipsa’s notes. It called on powers beyond those Star could directly command, and thus, it was what her mom and the high commission would have termed dark magic. Of course that was what Sam wanted to see her do! He wanted to see her cast dark magic! It made sense for a demon from hell to want her to do that. Fine, she would happily oblige!

“I call the darkness unto me, from deepest depths of earth and sea...” she begun.

Star was almost expecting the devil to stop her, again. Instead, he simply lowered his arms and waited. A dark mist formed around the mewman princess.

“... from ancient evils unawoken, to break the one who can’t be broken...”

He smiled at her as she said that, a smug knowing smile, like she had accidentally told a joke only Sam got. Her arms burned, as the scorched black veins surfaced once more, breaking through her usual glamour.

“To blackest night I pledge my soul, and crush my heart to burning coal, to summon forth the deathly power...”

She made sure to point at his heart this time. The half-star of her wand turned pitch black. Her own eyes glowed green.

“... to see my HATED. FOE. DEVOURED!!”

The ink-like blast emerged from the magic wand. Although a beam as well, this was of a very different nature than her opening attack. This was not her own magic, this was her calling unto the powers of death itself to annihilate her foe. It was a power designed to kill that which was immortal, and the being in front of her seemed likely to qualify for that title, particularly if Toffee, now clearly quite dead, had. But, then again, there was immortal and then there was immortal. So, would this be enough? Sam certainly didn’t seem all that concerned.
In fact, the ancient devil made no movement to stop her spell, or to block it. He let it hit his chest, right where his heart should have been. For a moment, tendrils of darkness crisscrossed his loathsome azure light, a black shadow forming over his torso and projecting all around them as it blocked the light flowing from the marble skin. His eyes grew wider with mild surprise, the air in front of them once more catching fire. But then, the shadow began shrinking, the tendrils withering, and an eternal burning brightness returned to his unharmed form.

For a supposedly infallible spell, that particular bit of magic had so far helped Star a total of zero times.

“Well, that was much better!” Sam commented cheerfully. “Now we are finally starting to get somewhere. What else have you got?”

Star let herself collapse onto the floor. That had been it. That was the deadliest and darkest spell she knew, and it hadn’t been enough to either hurt or please the devil. She could use her other spell, the one powered by anger. But it was strictly a downgrade compared to Eclipsa’s original spell. Besides, right now, she didn’t feel anger. She felt despair.

She looked back at her friends behind the barrier. Marco was slamming his bare fists against the shielding bubble, trying to get out. Jackie just looked, well, she looked broken. Tom was horrified, but didn’t dare move against Sam. Janna was unreadable behind her cowl. Star held the human boy’s eyes and mouthed: ‘I am so sorry’.

She didn’t expect this to work, and also didn’t expect it to impress Sam enough to let her go. But if she was going to die here, then she would come out swinging. She pointed the wand at him one last time, closed her eyes, and dipped down.

When she opened her eyes once more, they glowed bright green, and a huge ball of emerald flames burst out of the half-star crystal, then another, and another. Raw meteors of destructive magic. As they got near the creature that claimed the title of the Final Cold, the fireballs seemed to veer off course, to go around his body, rather than through it. At first Star was confused, it hurt to watch him now, her mind yelling at her that something was wrong. Then she realized that it was not that her spells were being diverted, the green flame comets flew in perfect straight lines. Instead, space itself was curving around her foe. His look was one of contemptuous disappointment.

“I see,” he sighed. “So that was all? That’s unfortunate. No, I don’t think that will do... it won’t do at all. I am afraid we are back to the original plan. Oh well, it makes little difference, I suppose.”

He glared at Star, and blue fire exploded all around her, she felt a jolt of electricity course through her body as lightning struck her. Vulnerable and weak without her protective spells, she was thrown back, crashing on the floor a few steps further away from Sam. The wand flew out of her hands, gracefully floating towards the devil’s open palm.

“Ah, yes, Mewni’s royal magic wand: a remarkable tool, even in its cleaved condition,” he spoke appreciatively, inspecting the royal heirloom, passed onto Star by her mother. “Yet it can be easily destroyed, by a simple verse, whispered into it. You know? I could just lift that spell from your mind, were I so inclined. But, then again, where is the fun in that? Let’s see if we can think of more clever ways...”

Star tried to get up, but her muscles didn’t seem to be done spasming. The wand. He was going to destroy the wand! Her mother’s wand!

“In the absence of that spell, few forces can damage it. It was built to last a million years!” he announced. There was a cold tinge of sarcasm to his awed pronouncement. “Perhaps more. But, the
question is, how much more?"

He held the wand by its head, not its handle, and Star felt, more than saw, something horrifying. Time seemed to bend just around Sam’s fist. It seemed to flow, not slow as tar, but quick and irresistible, like a river through a broken dam, the crack widening more the more water passed through it in an accelerating vicious cycle. The half-star grew ever dimmer, the handle began to corrode, the wings to crack and break.

“Here is an old lesson, princess: time is an irresistible force, even in the face of magic,” he grinned. “Ten million. Twenty. A hundred million years. And then, just dust.”

He closed his palm and a stream of fine shimmering powder, like sand, crashed onto the floor. The wand had been turned to nothing by the unnaturally induced passage of time. Star wouldn’t have felt worse if the devil had burned her right arm to ashes instead. The wand was as much a piece of her as any part of her body.

“Given time, things break, worlds crumble,” Sam noted, “and people?...” He extended his hand once more towards the princess, snapping his fingers at her. “People die.”

She was vaguely aware of the bubble spell behind her collapsing as the wand dissolved. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Marco’s look of fury as he began some strange motions with his hands. Tom’s eyes glowed red. Janna rushed past where the barrier had been. She ran towards Sam with her left hand raised in front of her. Tom seemed to overtake the witch just a second later.

But it was hard for Star to understand what was going on, because, at that moment, she stopped breathing. She felt air leaving her and not coming back. She brought her hands to her throat. She tried to inhale. She grasped for air, but none was to be found. She was suffocating, unable to breathe. It was not that the air wasn’t around her, it was that she couldn’t touch it. For some reason, air and her were no longer in the same world. Her lungs burned. She felt dizzy.

It all went black.

----

Seven minutes, Marco thought to himself. It takes as many as seven minutes for the human body to die from lack of oxygen. If that was indeed what was happening to Star.

He had seen the wand crumble to dust, the barrier fall, and his best friend, his girlfriend, the girl he loved, lie helpless on the marble floor, convulsing. He begun the Fierceness Ritual the very moment the protective shield was gone. Even with the added strength, he knew he couldn’t win this fight. If Star’s magic couldn’t harm Sam, then what hope had he? But there was no way he would let her fight alone, not now that the bubble keeping him from her side was not there anymore.

This was all his fault! If he had been able to protect Jackie a few minutes ago, none of this would have happened. She wouldn’t have faced Sam’s cruel test, and Star wouldn’t be fighting for her life now. Oh god, Marco had failed both of them! All because he screwed up, all because he held back, because he didn’t use the ritual as soon as the stupid costume party started! He had been such a coward, and now they all had to pay for his mistake!

When he saw Star gasping for air, motioning to her throat, he felt a sick cold terror, an overwhelming sense of dread. It almost broke his concentration entirely, causing the ritual to misfire. But he suddenly remembered his first aid training. Star wasn’t dead, not yet, the Safe Kid thought, just unconscious. He only needed to find a way to get her breathing again in the next
seven minutes. Maybe more for a mewman. Mewmans were tougher than humans in almost every way, after all.

This meant that he had to maintain control, to keep a clear mind. Unfortunately, that was about to become ten times harder.

He finished the last word, the last gesture. Immediately, he felt his entire body tense, his muscles ache, his bones compress under inhuman pressure, his heart race faster than it had ever been designed to, and his mind cloud with an overpowering thirst for violence. It seemed that the effects of Sam’s costume did add up with those of the ritual, just as he had feared. It didn’t help that Marco had every reason in the multiverse to want to do violence right now.

He had remembered all about the ritual from last night’s dream. He figured that was the point of him dreaming about it. Maybe the Finding Ritual had worked, and he had indeed found strength. But strength had been the wrong thing to ask for! It would not be enough. Sam was far beyond any mortal strength. Marco needed smarts. He had to think, now, while he still somewhat could. He had to find a way, any way, to save Star. He didn’t care to die here, as long as she survived. Wait, not only Star, Jackie too!

In a moment of clarity, before rushing towards Star, Marco stomped on Jackie’s lower chains, cutting them in two. He also crushed the ones tying her arms together with his right hand. It took most of his newfound might, but the magical chains did break under the strength of a hundred men. For a moment, Marco had been worried that even that would not be enough to affect Sam’s magical costume props. But, apparently, those were not meant to be real restraints, not by the devil’s standards.

Marco’s little pause meant that Janna and Tom had gotten ahead of him.

Tom was the first to reach the damn bastard. Sam smiled at him. His eyes dimmed. The extreme heat that had permeated the air from the moment Star’s barrier fell was suddenly gone as well.

“What’s up, bro? Hope you enjoyed the party! Shame you all couldn’t hold your end of the deal. But, oh well, better luck next time? Tom, you are free to go... the rest stay, of course...”

“Leave! Star! ALONE!!” growled the demon prince. His eyes burned red, streams of fire burst out of his hands, he flew up high into the air.

The devil’s eyes burned blue, a blisteringly hot wind blew all around them once more. Sam’s voice boomed, “Do you truly believe you can threaten me, Thomas Lucitor?”

Tom floated back to the ground, his eyes back to normal, his teeth gritting in anger, his entire body shaking, and yet he hesitated to fight a fight he knew he couldn’t win. Janna rushed past him.

Meanwhile, Marco, head pounding, turned his attention towards Star’s unconscious body. The Fierceness Ritual had been a mistake. He didn’t need this much strength for what he was about to do, what he needed was to be careful. He leaned on top of the princess, put a single palm over her chest, and pressed his lips to her own. He begun the compressions, and tried, carefully at first, to breath air directly into her mouth. His clouded mind fought against him, telling him that he should be out there, ripping Sam limb by limb rather than clumsily trying to administer CPR.

It didn’t work, anyway. The air seemed to refuse to go inside Star’s body. Even blowing with all his strength, he couldn’t get the mewman to inhale. In his desperation, he tried harder and harder, his thoughts falling behind a red mist of anger and confusion. He heard a sickening crack. One of Star’s ribs had broken under his superhuman strength.
Janna held a hand up in front of herself. Around her ring finger, a double-coiled spiral tattoo began to glow blue. It was too far for Marco to see it clearly, even if he were paying full attention, but the mark shook and slithered like a living thing. The girl’s eyes glowed blue as well. It was the same shade of blue light of Sam’s own blinding eyes, although far less intense: a candle-flame to his inferno. A mass of shadowy tendrils appeared all around the witch.

“Shall I let you burn today, J-flame, then? Waste your fire in vain against powers far beyond your comprehension? No, I think not,” Sam declared. He pointed his hand at Janna and clicked his fingers. Her skin begun turning an unearthly shade of gray. She opened her mouth to scream in pain, but froze before any sound could come out. In an instant she had been turned to stone. “I do wonder if you simply felt you had to do this. A matter of pride perhaps? I would have thought that, deep down, you’d be happy to see the princess gone.”

“You... you...” Tom flew at the ancient being, eyes glowing, his entire body covered in bright red flames, muttering something that sounded to Marco like the demon prince’s version of a ritual. This time, he was not deterred by his own fear, or by the known futility of the assault. Guided by Tom’s magic, dark chains and slabs of stone appeared all around Sam, trying to contain him. They immediately exploded into a thousand pieces, then fell uselessly to the floor. A marble white hand seized a charging Tom by the neck.

“Whoa, way to grow a pair, ‘bro’!” he spoke. His eyes still glowing this time, the timbre of his voice still inhuman, the pretense of fake amiableness more transparent than ever before. “You know very well who it is you face and yet... yet you are willing to throw your long existence away? For them, who live lives short as a candle’s wick? For your human pet?”

“For my ex-girlfriend!” Tom corrected him.

“Well, what can I say? It touches my heart!” Then, with a cruel smile, he added, “...shall I return the favor?”

He placed his free remaining hand atop Tom’s chest, raised two fingers up, and, with a swift movement, plunged them into the demon prince’s skin, piercing muscle and bone like it was wet tissue paper. Marco heard the Lucitor child yell in agony, as the older fiend scraped a large piece of his heart out of his chest, throwing the rest of the eviscerated body to the ground. A pressurized fountain of blood gushed out of the wound. Tom seemed alive, or whatever it was that demons were as opposed to dead, but he twisted and howled in pain, seeming completely beyond conscious thought.

“By the way, that reminds me,” Sam turned around towards Marco, who was still desperately trying to bring Star back to life. “You are wasting your time. So let me just make that fact somewhat more evident, for your own benefit.”

The devil glared at the princess’ inert form, his eyes narrowing suddenly. Marco felt his own skin blister under the heat and jumped away by reflex. What he saw then was more horrifying than any sight in the last few days, than any other of the horrors of hell.

Star’s hair caught flames, burning from blond to coal black, turning slowly to ashes. The Countess costume caught fire as well, quickly burning into nothing. Then, her naked body began graying and shrinking, not turning into stone like Janna’s, but sort of desiccating. Her flesh turned coal-like first, and then ignited, leaving only her bones. Finally, those too cracked and broke, until nothing remained of the mewman but dust and a scorched silhouette on the marble and obsidian floor.

It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be. Star was... NO...
Marco sprang up to his feet, looked at Sam’s smug smiling face, and there was no longer an ounce of human thought in the boy’s mind. He roared like a savage beast, and charged straight at the devil. In the back of his mind, he knew the most important person in his life had just died, that he had seen her body being literally cremated in front of him. But there was no grief yet, not even anger, at least not anger of a kind he had ever known before. All that was Marco was silent, dead just as much as Star was. What remained was a single minded instinct, a need to see the being in front of him destroyed.

He punched Sam directly in the face, and the devil made no move to avoid him or block his strike. It was yet again the familiar sound of cracking bones when his right hand broke. He tried the left, with equal results. He kicked, and broke one foot as well. A hand lifted him from his chin, and threw him back hard against the floor, three out of four limbs were bending in entirely the wrong way.

It all went black.

----

Jackie looked at the carnage around her through wide glazed out eyes. This was all her fault. She had failed to do the right thing. She had mistook what she was supposed to do. She had been willing to endure an inhuman act of violation to avoid this fate, to suffer torture to spare her friends. Yet that surrender itself had caused their demise. It had led to Star’s death, possibly Marco’s as well. Her turn was probably next, and that was, in a way, the least of her sorrows.

The azure brightness burned her flesh. She didn’t feel it. The pain inside made the one outside superfluous. She walked towards Sam, a step at a time. She could have collapsed into the floor, just as easily. It made no difference to her either way. But, for some reason, she kept marching towards the cruel devil.

He said something. She didn’t understand what it was. She was barely aware of Tom’s screams of agony. Marco and Janna were both silent and unmoving, one unconscious, the other stone. Star had burned to ashes before her very eyes. What words could even have meaning after that? Did Sam taunt her? Ask her a question? Threaten that she was next? Either way, she did not care. There was nothing she could care about anymore.

She saw the devil raise a hand and point towards her, she did not flinch. She wondered how he was going to kill her, with the detached curiosity of one who knows such matters to be quite trivial, all things considered. Sam was right, he was absolutely right, it was all a charade, and then came oblivion.

But the marble white hand shifted ever so slightly, pointing to the empty space in front of her. Before Jackie, a black sword appeared, buried into the broken mosaic under their feet. The hilt had once more the twelve spiked circle, and the sigil of the flaming sword: Sam’s seal.

The human girl put her hand on the hilt. It scorched her skin. It didn’t matter. She lifted the sword, pulling it from the ground. She charged hopelessly against the refulgent devil with the weapon he himself gave her, she stroke with fury and determination born of futility.

She felt the blade break into a dozen shards on impact. She felt her own body fly through the air before hitting the hard floor. She felt the blunt pain of the impact.

Jackie briefly considered staying down and simply waiting for the final blow. When she got up, it wasn’t that she cared enough to fight, it was that she didn’t care enough to surrender. Another sword, identical to the first, appeared before her. She pulled it, and charged.
“... you think, perhaps, that you can defeat me?” she finally heard the words, as the sword once again broke on impact and she was thrown through the air a second time. It was not arrogance, but a quiet tone of amused curiosity coming from her tormentor.

“No,” she answered as she stood up. Another sword appeared before her.

“Do you expect this will help your friends?”

Metal exploded.

“No.”

A fourth sword was brought forth into the world.

“Then... Why?”

A shrug. A shower of steel shards.

----

If Sam palace had been bright with a blue hateful dawn, this place was a blackness beyond that of a moonless night. Worse than that, since no stars shone inside the infinite expanse of the void. None until she opened her eyes. Once she did, her own pale magical glow was the only source of light in the nothingness. There was no up, and no down, no forward or backwards, there was only her, and not a speck more.

“Where am I?” she questioned the emptiness.

“Think of it as the threshold,” spoke a voice in the darkness. Sam’s voice. Not booming brass bells, but the cruel amused tone she had heard him use in her dream. “It is the place after where ‘place’ has lost meaning, and the last moment that exists in time. At least, for you.”

He appeared before her, not as a glowing god of destruction, but as a bleak and macabre figure. His eyes were not bright with burning azure light. They weren’t even the human blue irises he sometimes pretended to have. Instead, they were empty sockets, filled only with darkness. His marble skin was still statuesque, but now it looked muted gray, dirty, and full of cracks. It reminded her of gravestones. His golden hair had turned to rusted lead.

There was no brightness coming from the Endless Shadow, just the same grimness that seemed to suffuse this whole place. There was an instant in which Star wondered if this form was weaker than the one she had just faced. It didn’t quite seem that way, just an insurmountable mightiness of a different kind. But maybe, just maybe, she could chance to try again, to continue her fight in this place, to unleash righteous vengeance upon the being who... who killed her.

“Oh... I am dead...” she realized. “I am dead, aren’t I?”

“Mostly,” Sam replied, smirking. At least, his lips curved. A smile in a face with no eyes was a particularly unsettling expression to behold.

“So,” Star speculated, “dead and in hell and you are the corresponding devil to torture me? Because that’d be great, really great...” she spat, sarcastically.

Disturbing as Sam’s new form was, Star was not afraid of it. If nothing else, being already dead tended to remove fear of death as a factor in her decision making.
“Not so,” replied Sam. “I am just holding you here for but a moment, Princess Butterfly. Soon enough I’ll have to let go, and you will… drift beyond.”

“You mean to heaven?” Frankly, she was surprised she still qualified for that.

“Oh no, you don’t. Not in the least!” Sam assured her, with a laugh as dark as the world around them.

So, that confirmed what she already suspected: he could read her thoughts. Because, of course he could. They never had a chance, had they?

“No. And, well, it is somewhat more complicated than that, anyways, in your particular case,” Sam continued. “Dissolution, probably. Maybe reincarnation. The City of Dis wouldn’t be a final enough prison for a soul like yours, and make no mistake, once I let go, if you are still here, the result will be very final…”

“Good,” said Star, defiantly. She had lost, she had died, but she would not give the devil the satisfaction of seeing her break.

Honestly, she was not sure if it was a good thing. To die, that is. Although she couldn’t imagine how it could be worse than what she had just left behind. On the other hand, if she was dead, then there was nobody left to avenge her mother.

“Well, you could still do that,” Sam chuckled. It was a laugh that sucked out joy from the void itself, an anti-laugh. “It would be a miracle, of course. But you are doomed by prophecy, after all, Princess Star, and a proper destiny begets many miracles…”

“Doomed?” Star asked, uncertain.

“It is another way to say: fated, destined,” the devil explained, clearly aware of which meaning Star had first understood. Then, solemnly, he intoned: “Behold the dark queen ascending, her will the thread of fate unraveling. Behold the force of evil incarnate, borne of deepest heart’s desire…” Does any of that sound familiar?”

Indeed those were all familiar words, from Cass’ prophecy. But Star couldn’t see what that had to do with anything right now. Clearly, if she was dead, and about to be dissolved, or whatever, she could no longer become a dark queen. Unless she was supposed to have been one already. The case could be made for that one, she realized, although she had never really done anything quite that evil...

“You are missing the second part, Princess Star. Your will has unraveled, or will unravel fate. Maybe both. Maybe you continuously unravel it. Or maybe your will is made of the thread of fate unraveling. Words are tricky slithering things, after all,” he mused. “But the point is that you have a destiny, one I think you haven’t yet fulfilled, even if I perceive only the broadest contours of what it might be. What is death against the tides of fate? No, Star, I do not think I have destroyed you, although I would be amused to find otherwise. In any case, as a matter of preference, I do not desire your tale to end today. I expect not dissolution or reincarnation, but rather… resurrection.”

“Resurrection?” Star repeated in confusion. “You will revive me? Then why kill me in the first place??” she asked, exasperated.

“I will do nothing of the sort!” Sam stated, pointedly. “In fact, I cannot. It goes beyond my attributions. It might be more accurate to say it goes against them. I destroy, I devour, I corrode, I kill. I do not create life. Holding you in place is one thing. Pulling you towards life would be quite
another. But you, however, can do it. I have seen you do it, in a future that no longer exists. All you need is sufficient motivation, I think. Something 'borne of deepest heart’s desire’, perhaps? So, what do you desire?

To avenge her mom, Star thought. That was the desire that had brought her to the deepest depths of hell, that had pushed her to learn the dark arts, that had made her drag all her friends into damnation with her. That was her wish, to kill the thing that killed her mom! It was a want that she was willing to undo death to fulfill.

Star closed her eyes and dipped down. The void was deep, deeper than any other place she had dipped into before. There were no magical chunks of reality to grasp at, not anywhere near enough for her to sense. Sam wasn’t there, either, not when she looked at the energies of the place he had called the threshold. If he was here with her at all, it was inside her head. There was nothing besides her in the realm of magic, same as there wasn’t anything in the visible void.

Until, after a while, Star became vaguely aware of something so distant as to defy comprehension, a magical layer that laid even below that which she could usually access while dipping down. It was dark, and bright, and incomprehensibly powerful, and it called to her with a siren’s song. If she grasped at that power, she was certain that getting back to Sam’s palace would be easy. As her mind honed into it, the power pulsed violet and black. It told her that she could do it, that she would have her revenge, that her mom would be proud when the creature of green flames was extinguished under a darkness so deep that it would swallow worlds, and a terrible violet brightness that could turn the night into a life-ending dawn.

Star opened her eyes, terrified. “No, no, no, no...”

It was not what she wanted. Not at that cost! If that was where her quest for revenge was leading her, if that was what the prophecy truly meant, then she didn’t want vengeance anymore! Her mom would never have wanted Star to do it, anyways, especially not like that. She had been willing to delve into dark magics to avenge Moon, but this was not the kind of evil she was willing to embrace. Eclipsa’s notes were wrong... not all knowledge was good knowledge.

Her wish, the wish of her deepest heart’s desire, was to never become what she had just glimpsed. She remembered the rest of the prophecy: ‘Only surrender may undo the shadow, but the price shall be too high to pay. In the end the world itself must shatter, and death shall be the one to claim her’. She thought she finally understood what it meant.

“I won’t do it,” she said. Death was preferable to a destiny like that. “Sam, let me go! Let me die.”

The devil seemed to think it through for a moment.

“No. That’s not it. That’s not what it means... I would know it if you got it right,” he declared. “I am afraid you must still ascend back to the world of the living, until we both find out what those words truly conceal.”

Sam waved a hand. It was a slow ponderous movement. He didn’t seem weak. On the contrary, there was an infinitely deep force to this version of him. But, at the same time, he certainly seemed less energetic than his shining visage from earlier.

Below them, in a ghostly play made of blue light against the infinite black vastness, the scene back at Sam’s Palace unfolded before the mewman’s eyes. Star saw Marco’s unconscious body on the floor, Janna’s literally petrified look of terror, Jackie stumbling back to her feet amidst a sea of broken metal shards.
“Now, how is that for motivation?”

---

“Why?” asked Sam.

Jackie had no answer. She hadn’t had one the first time, not the tenth, not the twentieth. She had lost count after that. But she got up on her feet, grabbed the black sword that appeared that very instant in front of her, and charged.

Well, she didn’t charge. Not anymore. Her muscles were too sore, her body too heavy. She walked. She dragged herself, step by step, towards the Lord of Dis. Her skin was red now, insolated by the harsh blue light of the ancient devil.

It was hopeless. It had been hopeless from the beginning. This sword had no more a chance of hurting Sam than any of the others. They said that the definition of insanity was to try the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. But, in this case, it was not like there was anything else she could do that would work any better. It had been hopeless since the fight begun, and she had known it even then. She could no more win against Sam than she could bring Star back to life or wish Marco safely back to Echo Creek.

In fact, Jackie realized, it had been hopeless even before that. At some point in her mad repetition, she had realized that they had been given no chance to outsmart the devil at his game. She understood that, had she taken the dagger back during the last minutes of the party, Sam would have claimed that defending herself broke her role, and violated his hospitality. Her role was to rebel, but only after she had chosen not to. If she had indeed rebelled, if she had fought, her role would have been to bow down. She hadn’t failed a test, she had been placed in an unwinnable scenario. Just like the one she was in now.

Another broken sword, another rain of shards, another painful halting act of standing up.

Maybe that ought to make her feel better, to know that she had not really made a mistake back then, that either way the outcome was the same. It didn’t. It just meant Sam had been playing them for fools since far earlier than she thought. She walked again towards her invincible foe.

“Why?” he questioned. No more bothered or more tiredly than the first, or tenth, or twentieth, time.

Jackie wondered that as well. She knew this was useless. She could not hurt him. Star was gone. Marco was unconscious and she couldn’t help him escape. Nor could she help Janna or Tom. She had no illusions that begging or bargaining would allow her to save any of them. Maybe, if she kept doing this, Sam would take longer to kill them all. Maybe he was waiting for some other unfathomable reason, and Jackie herself was just meant to be his entertainment while he waited. Either way, he could kill them all in an instant, and nothing she did would stop him. Her valor didn’t matter. Her stubbornness didn’t matter. Her love for Marco didn’t matter. He would kill her, and him, and them all, and nothing she did one way or the other could affect that.

She had her answer.

“Why not?” she said, and she charged yet again.

Sam looked puzzled for a second, just a second. It was not an expression she could ever recall seeing on him. Then, he smiled, and she knew he understood her answer.

If it doesn’t matter either way, if nothing she could do mattered, if life was a charade, and the only possible end was oblivion, then why not? Why not fight to the last breath? And why not keep
charging? And why not stand up every time until you couldn’t stand anymore? If it was all meaningless, then how was surrender any better than defiance? If nothing she did made any difference, then all that made a difference, to herself, is what she did. She would die, but she would die not as a slave, but as a fighter. Even Sam, with all his power, couldn’t take that away from her anymore.

And so they continued, more broken swords, more hailing shards. Each time it was harder and harder to get up. Eventually, she couldn’t do it anymore. She lied on the floor, in the opposite condition of that in which she had begun this fight: an unbreakable spirit in a broken body.

It was defeat, but inside that there was a small victory, the only left to achieve. Sam never asked her ‘why’ again.

---

Star saw Jackie’s body stop moving. She saw all of her friends lying there on the remains of the marble and obsidian floor, defeated. She saw Sam lift a hand and bring his fingers together in a familiar gesture. His expression one of careless boredom. She knew he was about to do to them what he had done to her, to end a game of which he had finally gotten tired.

She had no choice. She dipped down. If she had to burn worlds to the ground to protect her friends, then so be it.

She reached for the magic deep below the void.

When she found it, she was surprised. It was different than before. There was darkness and harsh consuming violet light, but also streams of golden brightness, warm and inviting, and a rainbow shimmer over it all. It was no less terrible than before, no less dangerous, but it was even more beautiful. It was whole. The wish of her heart was not only vengeance upon her mother’s killer, and vengeance upon Sam, but also to help her friends, to heal them, to protect them. She went into the depths with enough hate and pain for a dozen dark queens ascending, but also, with just as great an amount of love.

Both emotions coursed intertwined through Star’s mind as she brought herself back into the world of the living. It felt a little bit like pushing through the surface of an opaque ocean. She arrived with a flash of purple light, her body unfolding in mid air in the center of the destroyed ballroom, right between Sam’s glowing form and Jackie’s barely stirring body.

She had all of her six arms extended. Her hair shone golden, suddenly formed into a set of miraculously levitating pigtails. The borders of her wings were bright gold as well, tinted by the reflected blue and purple light around her. The inside of the wings, however, the greater part of their surface, was pitch black, black like the void had been. Her cheekmarks were pink hearts once again, tinted mauve. Her eyes were closed.

She came into the world as most do: naked. A second later, however, she manifested a dress for herself. It was black, with long golden trims in the shape of flames along the neck and the hem of the skirt. In the middle, there was an embroidered blooming rose with a heart symbol in its center. The entire pattern was in dark violet thread and almost invisible against the light radiating from her. A golden diadem with long devil horns appeared atop her head, and black boots around her feet.

A stream of dust floated up from the ground, and gathered by Star’s uppermost right hand. It formed into a new, yet familiar, shape. First there was a scepter of night-black steel, adorned with dragon wings, demon horns, and twelve small spikes along the edge of its circular head. Inside the head there was a hole, and a sphere of sun-bright golden flame. It was not a depiction of a star, nor
a gem shaped like a star. It was a star; a real burning star, albeit of an impossibly small volume and mass. Slowly, it transmuted itself into a crystal like that of Star’s old wand, if still visibly brighter with its own golden light. It was whole once more, not split in half. It was set firmly in place, with each of the five points touching the inner border of the hollow wand. A small crack in the shape of a crescent moon formed inside the crystal, in the middle of the star. Violet light shone from inside the fracture, bright enough to be seen even against the solar brightness of the rest of the wand’s core.

Star opened her eyes then. They glowed with a bright violet light that nearly outshone Sam’s own. She was love, and she was hate.

For now, love took priority.

----

Marco inhaled suddenly, and felt a soothing warmth over his arms and legs, and on the inside of his chest, and in every corner of his battered body. He felt himself healing and mending, and opened his eyes to see the mewman’s floating body through a new protective purple bubble all of his own.

“Star?!” he exclaimed, tears of joy running down his eyes.

He looked around, and saw Jackie getting back up, looking down at her hands as deep burns seemed to recede in an instant. She was surrounded by her own shielding bubble. Her hair flowed all around her in magical wind. Tom, whose chest wound had now been closed, and Janna, who was no longer stone, had their own protective spheres surround them as well.

They all stared at each other in surprise, and then at the gold and black shape of Star, framed against intense violet light. She looked unearthly. She looked powerful. She looked beautiful. She looked... amazing.

----

“Alright, now, this is exciting,” Sam spoke. Star’s attention converged towards the evil fiend like an avalanche. If looks could kill, Star’s would have murdered her foe. Had it been anyone other than Sam, perhaps she could, and would, have. But he barely seemed to notice. “It’s been a rather long while since I last witnessed an apotheosis.”

He smirked as the mewman held his gaze. The air sparked and burned in between their aligning sights. This time, she had no need to run from his deathly brightness, from the burning power of his glare. She stared the devil down, her destructive will opposing his own.

He lifted a hand, and a swarm of tiny portals opened all around the princess, leaving no escape path. She stirred the magic below the world, bending space itself to create an opening, and gracefully glided out of the ambush. The topology of the cosmos restored itself as she passed through. Behind her, many bright claws of light grasped uselessly at the empty air. The resurrected princess looked upon the devil with murderous intent. Sam was grinning.

He floated slowly up into the air, and Star followed, cautiously. Below them, she could see the City of Dis, ever burning, and, to their sides, the twelve claw-like towers that surrounded it. Above them, the maelstrom of ghostly blue souls, and the black hole in the middle to which they all flowed, encompassed the entirety of the heavenly vault.

This was good, she thought, he was leading them away from her friends, where she wouldn’t need
to worry about hurting them by accident with her new powers. Up here, she could let go, hit him with everything she had, and hope it would be enough. She had been in butterfly form before, back when she first went through mewberty, and she had seen her mom do it as a battle technique as well. This was different, somehow. She felt like she was still dipping down, every second, not going up and down like when she cast wordless and wandless spells before. It was, rather, as if she were constantly submerged in the chunkier stuff of reality’s stew, and slowly diving lower and lower.

She raised her wand towards the devil and simply willed him undone. A twisting stream of gold and black fire shot out from the crystal core. Sam sidestepped it with ease.

“Well... it is a start,” he declared, mockingly.

‘I’ll show you a start!’ thought Star, furiously. Her mind tugged at the fabric of reality itself around them, and a thousand lances of bright violet light appeared out of nowhere, converging on Sam’s floating form from every possible direction. They impacted the fiend’s marble body, creating ripples of blackness like stones thrown on the surface of a lake. He seemed quite unbothered by this. She groaned and the ground seemed to shake in response.

He swiped at the air with one hand. A dozen of the spheres above them, the ones that were supposedly made out of souls, fell towards were Star was, like bright blue comets. Flapping her wings furiously, she managed to dance around them through the empty air. A single meteor graced her left boot, sending a jolt of pain through her body, piercing through the magical power that protected her. Somehow, even in this form, Sam remained well beyond her.

“So, what now?!” growled Star. Her voice was lower and it echoed with two different tones. “You kill me again? Is that it? Then why coax me into reviving? What’s the point?! Why are you doing this?!”

“There is no point, Star Butterfly, never mistake that lesson, there is never a point,” he replied, a tint of annoyance in his voice. “As for why I am doing this? To amuse myself... and to save me an unpleasant bit of work further down the line. In terms of the second matter, actually, I am done. We can head back down the moment you wish. I will let you and your friends go. I am thoroughly satisfied with how this all has turned out.” He held both hands up, then smirked. “But, well, I believe it is you who isn’t done, Princess Star. You still wish to hurt me, and it amuses me to see you try.”

He was, she realized, entirely right. She wanted him dead. She wanted to destroy him. She wanted to hurt him more than anything in the world right now, except perhaps for making sure Marco, and Jackie, and Tom, were all alright. Star had the odd sensation that she had struck some sort of bargain by coming back. If nothing else, her resurrection had surely increased the chances of her fulfilling that awful prophecy. She felt that she was being cheated out of something if that deal did not include enough power to wipe that smug grin of Sam’s face, preferably against a bunch of jagged rocks.

Actually, that gave her an idea. It was an old childish spell, one she had learned far later than was considered common among the wielders of the royal wand. It was not that it had been in any way difficult for her to master the spell. She just hadn’t a use for it, not until she needed to enchant a certain magical crystal, to allow her friends to float into the air, in the dimension of pillows and hanging silk ribbons. It all felt like a lifetime ago. Star supposed that now, after tonight, it had been a lifetime ago.

But, sometimes, magnitude and raw power could outshine magical complexity. She understood this now. She pointed her wand at one of the huge black towers and yelled, “Levitato!”
The tower broke right in half. The upper part floated slowly in mid air towards them, a veritable flying mountain. It exploded into a million fragments of stone, sharp edged projectiles of hard solid igneous rocks. She flung them like a titanic hailstorm towards the azure-glowing devil.

“What the hell do you mean an unpleasant bit of work?!” she shouted at him as she released her attack. Despite her fury, she processed every word he said. Her mind burst with raw emotion and held itself in detached attention, all at once. This was not the first time the being had hinted at wanting Star to accomplish something for his own benefit. She wanted to know what, probably so she could do the opposite. Good fucking luck getting her to do any favors for him at this point!

Sam waved both hands around and the stone fragments sizzled and burned. They turned to liquid magma and then evaporated, becoming a black cloud of noxious smoke, enveloping the two of them. Star coughed, and adjusted her magical shields to protect her from the inhospitable air as well as the burning heat of vaporized rock.

“I mean the creature, the one you seek,” he replied calmly. “It is something that should never have been, called forth by an unknowing pact that never should have been made. It is an abomination to the natural order of the cosmos...”

“SHADOW BEAST SWARM!” was her first reply. She followed the spell with the rest of her response. “So?! It sounds like you would be happy about that! Might even throw a costume party for it as well!”

Under her magic, the smoke around them began to form into fearsome winged beings: dragons, thestrals, and huge phoenixes, all made of translucent smoke and darkness, with bright pulsating hearts of violet light at their core. They cried and growled and fell upon the marble-skinned devil from all directions. Star could feel their hunger, it mirrored her own hate.

“Every creature at that party, from the meanest zombie to the proudest god, has a place in the order of the cosmos,” Sam shrugged, taking on the tone of a bored teacher repeating a standard lecture to a dull child. It was clear to the mewman it was an idea he himself didn’t believe in, not entirely. “Or so goes that particular bit of nonsense.”

He zoomed through the air, fast as lightning, tearing the summoned creatures apart with his bare hands. He briefly smiled as he strangled shadowy phoenixes and ripped the beating violet light out of conjured dragons. He was having fun, the infernal bastard! Star could follow his movements easily, but to lesser eyes he would have been an unseen flash, destroying a thousand beasts in less than a second, one by one, with a craftsman’s fastidiousness and zeal.

“I have a role of my own too, unfortunately,” the devil added. “One I’d rather not have to play, not in that way, not on their terms. But alas, there is only so much my leash extends, after all. I can’t avoid all of my own lines in the script of our grand shared farce. If you don’t destroy it first, then I’ll eventually be compelled to do so myself. It is a law I cannot break anymore than I can return life...”

‘Not if I find a way to kill you first’, thought Star. She closed her eyes. Suddenly, she was aware of, well, of everything. She felt the energies of her friends down there, the tangle of strange magics that had somehow found themselves mixed with Marco, without the princess even noticing, the twisted inside-out thing that was now Janna’s soul, as well as Tom’s familiar fire. She felt the legions of demons below, the chorus of souls above. And she felt Sam. She felt Sam’s power, all around her, some in front of her, yes, but, mainly, it rained down from above. It was then that she realized her mistake.

Maybe Eclipsa’s spell truly was not strong enough to hurt Sam either way, but that was not the only
reason it had failed. The older Butterfly had said so herself: ‘aim it directly at its heart’. Star wasn’t aiming anywhere near Sam’s heart, when she pointed her wand at the marble skin chest!

“And you seriously expect me to do you a favor?!” she shouted at the devil. “After all of this! Why would I not simply wait for you and that blighted thing to kill each other instead?!”

It was worth considering. As much as she wanted to be the one to avenge her mother, if the creature was going to die either way, why not wait? Especially if that inconvenienced Sam.

“Because of the same reason your worlds have a Magical High Commission, Princess Star,” he begun. “For the same reason all worlds have their own guardians, and heroes, and failsafes for this sort of thing, and don’t simply all wait for my intervention...”

Star took her chance then. She closed her eyes, she dipped lower than she ever thought she could, and at the same time she begun to improvise. A dark poem of her own, a version of Eclipsa’s spell befitting her new powers. A call for the powers she had bargained with, to destroy her enemy. She didn’t need to chant it, just think it clearly enough.

‘I call the darkness within me,
from deepest depths I set you free,
Prophetic evil now awoken,
dark queen ascending oft forespoken,’

Was that allowed? To invoke yourself as the entity that a dark spell called forth? Well, Star was ready to find that out!

“... because when I am called to deal with the blights of reality, when I absolutely must be bound to my role, despite my best efforts to postpone it,” Sam continued, seemly oblivious to Star’s silent invocations. “Well, when things get to that point, the only choice is for me to, well... sterilize the area around the infection, cauterize the wound so to speak...”

For visual aids, he summoned blue light representations of Mewni, of Earth, of Tom’s underworld, and a number of other worlds that the mewman realized probably included Hekapoo’s domain. The latter seemed to be comprised of three major spheres and dozens of smaller dimensions in between. The maps made of light and smoke soon burned in blue flames, as Sam made a graphic display of what his intervention would entail. The term ‘Apocalyptic’ fell somewhat short, in that the word implied the end of only one single world.

“... such is my role,” he finished.

All the more reason why Star wanted Sam gone from his supposed place in the cosmos if she had any say in that.

‘I seize my fate without remorse,
I wish revenge and stay my course,
for just one spark of divine might,
that sets the skies themselves alight!’

She pointed upwards. Right at his heart. His real heart. A huge explosion of blackness surrounded her, as all light around the two of them, including their own blue and violet glows, seemed to be devoured in an instant by the crystal star in the middle of her new wand. A blinding blast of violet light emerged from the gem a moment after. It headed towards the center of the sky, towards the black hole in the maelstrom of souls, towards Sam’s true heart.
The figure that she had come to associate with the Endless Shadow, his anthropomorphic avatar, the marble-skinned devil of glowing blue eyes, launched itself up that instant, at an impossible speed. It chased the beam of glowing death.

He extended a hand out, and something even brighter than Star’s spell seemed to appear inside his palm. It was hard to see from where she was flying, far below Sam and the spell he pursued, but it looked a bit like a stream of fire, and a bit like a weapon, and a bit like a bright cut in the tapestry that was reality.

Star saw the Lord of Dis catch up to her own darkest spell, and cut through the fore of it with this mighty blade. He descended towards her, cutting through the middle of her spell as if it were a tree being carved in two by a lightning strike. Except it was light itself that which now split and splintered. When Sam finally approached the origin of the beam, and Star could see his face, she found that his eyes were glowing more intensely than ever, and that he was, for once, neither bored nor smiling. A moment before his blade reached her wand, he managed to somehow rotate his body to elbow her in the face instead, interrupting the spell and sending her flying down towards the ground.

Star crashed into what was left of the marble and obsidian mosaic of Sam’s ballroom floor, and pulverized the remaining design. She felt her strength leave her. Her wings shrunk into their usual tiny pink shapes. Four of her arms were absorbed back into her torso. The black and golden clothes vanished. Only the wand remained, in the hand of an exhausted naked Star.

Sam descended gently, right in front of her. For a moment, Star flinched in anticipation of the burning blue light, which her normal unshielded body was quite vulnerable to. But the devil’s glow was gone, or, at least, it was back to that which he showed them when they first met. He was clapping his hands, slowly.

“Well, today has been an exciting day!” Sam declared. “You were right J-flame! Inviting all of you to my party really did made things so much less dull!”

Star saw Janna clench her fists and pointedly stare down at the floor.

The princess also noticed that the mosaic seemed to be reconstructing itself, bit by bit, as were the walls around them.

“And Tom! You were great as well, bro!” he continued. “Standing up to me, for the sake of your loved ones? Knowing what you know I can do? That takes guts, you brave brave fool! I would know, I pulled out a bit of those too...”

Tom flinched and rubbed his chest, still looking nervous.

“Then there is Marco, of course,” he added. “Such a dedication to healing others while every fiber of your being is telling you to kill! Admirable! Shame you weren’t very good at either, of course, but such is life. To think you were actually so much more powerful, back when you were older... so much forgotten, so much wasted. Well, is not like it would have made a difference, but I would love to have seen that nonetheless...”

The walls were back up now, and the dome ceiling of the ballroom begun reforming atop them, covering the view of the empty wound in the heavens that was Sam’s true form.

“And what can I say about Jackie? Our unstoppable girl!” the devil grinned. “’Why not’? ‘Why not’ indeed! In fact, well, since I am in such a generous mood, here is one last one, as a souvenir. Nothing shall break it as long as you have the will to continue to wield it...”
A rapier made entirely of clear glass, except for its golden basket-hilted pommel, appeared in mid air in front of Jackie. It fell to the ground, clattering loudly, yet the glass blade did not break or chip in the slightest. The girl herself looked at the sword as if she was afraid it might bite. This being one of Sam’s creations, it well could.

“Finally there is our little supernova, back from the death and ready to embrace the call of destiny, no matter how many shall fall in her way!” he smiled broadly at Star. “You wouldn’t believe how many beings with pretty strong claims at godhood fail to see what you saw. And even fewer have gotten anywhere near as close as you did to actually hurting me! Congratulations!”

“Wait!” Star finally interrupted Sam’s monologue. “So, what now? Is that it? You beat us, and tortured us, and toyed with us, and you are just letting us go? I almost destroyed you and you are just... pleased? happy? entertained?!”

She knew she shouldn’t be looking at a gift warnicorn in the mouth, but it all seemed kind of, well, anti-climactic. The princess felt like there had to be a reason for all their suffering, for all the fear and despair, something beyond forcing her resurrection and amusing the devil.

“You tried to destroy me, Star. Tried. There is no guarantee you would have succeeded at harming me even if that spell had hit its intended target. But I’ll admit it was more than I was comfortable risking, which is something you should be quite proud about,” he said neutrally. To Star, it still felt condescending somehow. “I see no reason to believe you will attempt it again, however, and I think I have exhausted the value of each and every one of you to relieve my boredom. You all still broke our deal, of course. But you are welcome to stay another night in here, no tricks this time, and no promises. All I care to suggest is that I likely won’t harm you anymore if you don’t go out of your way to upset me,” he declared, magnanimously.

Then, as if suddenly noticing something, he added, “in fact, I haven’t actually harmed any of you, all things considered. Few are the mortals that have met me and walked away whole. If anything, each of you is now stronger than they were last night when you arrived, and better prepared for the challenges ahead. The way I see it, I did you a favor. Speaking of favors, I also warned you,” he looked at Star, “about why your mission is so much more important than a simple act of revenge. You truly got my best deal, all of you. If anything, you should all be grateful about how good of a friend I have been to you!”

“A friend?! A friend?” Star shouted. The faces around her seemed equally shocked by Sam’s casual tone. “You murdered me! By suffocation!”

“Turned me to stone!” added Janna.

“Ripped my beating heart out!” noted Tom.

“Would it make any difference if I apologized?” he offered, shrugging.

“Of course not!” Star remarked, furious.

“Then, I shall not bother trying,” Sam laughed.

Somewhat like a fading shadow, he disappeared, leaving them in an elegant and brightly lit ballroom. It gleamed impeccably, as if no one had so much as set a foot on it that night.

Chapter End Notes
SURPRISE! He was a good guy all along! :)

Also, I promise this is the one and only time in this story that a death fails to stick. In my defense, canon did it first, and a certain butterfly needed her wings.

Next chapter is... well, is probably getting split in two, so I don't have the title ready just yet. It will mostly contain teens talking, nothing to worry about...
Chapter Summary

In which fears are confronted, relationships re-examined, and there is sympathy for the devil.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 28: Necessary Conversations

It is told that, soon after the battle, Her Augustness, She Who Invites, Izanami no mikoto, Izanami no kami, who had been a guest at the masquerade, went back in search of the Endless Shadow, with intent of speaking her mind to him. It is told that she found him at the shores of light and life, at the border of the threshold of his own emptiness, and even beyond that. It is told that no mortal can imagine that place, and so we shall not endeavour to try.

It is told that she greeted him so, “Honorable Lord, we find ourselves rightly puzzled, that for all you lecture mortals about hospitality, you would act so rudely upon your other guests. Plainly evident it is that those who did not offend you did not deserve their immolation. We too were disrespected, for you hurried us away.” Her words were a slap with silken gloves, in intent and in fact.

It is told that the Final Cold responded in mockery of proper form, that he said thus: “Lady Izanami, far be from me the pridefulness of believing you would trouble yourself on account of rebuking my manners. Of what do you truly wish to speak?”

It is told that Her Augustness answered readily, “We fear that, seeing the burning shrine deep within the woods, you choose to send it kindling, instead of rain. Although the embers might not now worry you, in time a great forest fire might consume the whole mountain, and even you might find you can burn just as well...”

“Allonsense,” His Finality retorted. “And if it were so, then that would greatly amuse me. For I am invincible despite my own self, for a long time to come, and that is only to my annoyance. You forget that I will be the one to douse the fires of the last remaining suns, and then leave, at curtain call. If the play can be less dull until then, the script less obvious, then all the better for me.” This is what is told he said, although he himself might find fault with the wording.

It is told too that Izanami nodded in understanding. “You resent your place in the cosmos. That is the source of your unhappiness.”

It is told that Her Augustness who, for all that her legend was a cruel one, found herself at ease within the tapestry of creation, then felt pity for the mighty lord.

“I am not the Morning Star, Izanami no mikoto. I know there is no use raging against an unchangeable design,” the Sword Aflame Inevitable pointed out. “I, more so than any other, appreciate that fact.”
“Yet that very truth corrodes you,” spoke the goddess. Delivering retribution for past insults received.

Or so it is told.

---

The surface of the mirror reflected back only a partial view of the crime scene. It showed the place: an unremarkable corner within the bending hallways of Butterfly Castle. And, it showed the immobile body of the victim, his face frozen into a shocked rictus. It reflected, too, the panicked realization of his right hand man - or, well, right hand *snake* - as it discovered, far too late, how they had been tricked.

It did not show the weapon used, for the mirror itself had been such weapon. It did not show the perpetrator, either, for all that she made no effort to hide from the glass surface.

After all, Princess White cast no reflection.

She stood there, for a moment, admiring her handywork. It had been almost too easy to drive the nervous Rhombulus into heedless paranoia, to taunt him from the darkness, to lead him around passways and chambers, always one bend ahead of him and his hissing talking appendages.

After what had happened to Queen Moon, and to his fellow Magical High Commission members, the already trigger-happy jailer had been all to willing to fire at every shadow and every blur. Snow White had counted on that. She had grinned menacingly just as he came around to find himself face to face with her. She had bared her fangs like a wild animal to provoke him.

He had been too slow. Far too slow to hit her, too slow to even notice the framed glass behind her. The missing reflection had made it all the easier to overlook the full length mirror. The harebrained creature had hastily fired his beam, just as Princess White had intended, seeking to freeze her into an eternal crystal. She had dodged it with ease. As she jumped behind the glass, the fool had hit his own reflection instead.

Now the prison-maker was himself a prisoner, crystalized by his own magical beam. It had rebounded on the reflective surface and right back towards him. His expression, and that of his two living arms, stood frozen in respective endless grimaces of confusion, alarm, and reproach.

“Mirror mirror down the hall, one out cold and two to fall.”

---

Star felt exhausted. She was not hurt, none of them were. She had somehow healed her friends, she couldn’t quite remember the specifics as to how. The damage she herself sustained after her resurrection, if any, seemed to have evaporated, as well, the moment she transformed back out of her butterfly form. In fact, even a few old scars were now seemingly gone.

She looked at her arms, at the tendrils of burnt blackness under the skin that weren’t there any longer. There was no way she could maintain even the flimsiest of glamours in her current state, yet her skin was entirely unblemished, her veins unburnt. She was as healthy as she had ever been, at least physically. At the same time, she was absolutely drained in a way that was hard to describe. She couldn’t have conjured a goldfish if she wanted. Star supposed that explained Sam’s confidence that she would not attempt to fight him again.

They had won! Well, no, they had *lost*, actually, by any reasonable definition. But, at the same time, they had *survived*, they were free to go! Sam was still an asshole, and there was nothing Star
could do about the infernal bastard. Yet, at the same time, they were all alive, all free, all healthy, and alright! She felt like she was going to start crying of relief.

Then, as she looked at their faces, she remembered.

The party, the broken deal, the battle, all of that had taken the princess’ mind off from the fact that she had royally, pun unintended, but also sort of deserved, screwed things up with everyone in the room. She had slept with Tom! Marco and Jackie knew this and she had just brushed them off when they tried to talk about it!

Not to mention, it was her fault they were all here in the first place. All the stuff that had just happened, all the pain, all the horror, broken bones, hearts ripped out, inexorable hopelessness in the face of imminent death... She was the reason her friends had to endure all that! Sure, she had rescued them in the end, and that itself had been a literal miracle. But, without her blindness, without her stupidity, without her dragging them all here in search of revenge over her mom, they wouldn’t have needed rescuing in the first place!

No, no point in feeling guilty! Guilt was useless, after all!

But Star couldn’t prevent herself from feeling guilty, not anymore. Her emotions were no longer something she could lock in a cage and let out only when the chirping became too loud to ignore. It wasn’t even that she had rejected Sam’s lesson. Evil though he might be, he was right on every particular: feeling sorry for what she had done to her friends didn’t make any of it right, and didn’t make her one bit more deserving of forgiveness. And yet… she simply couldn’t help but feel a pit form inside her stomach at the mere thought of what they all had gone through, for the sake of her single-minded obsession! And that was without even counting the way she had been treating them these past few weeks! Hell, even before that! She knew Jackie had never fully forgiven her for spying on her and Marco, and Star hadn’t really made it any easier for her to do so.

How could she even look at them? At Marco, at Jackie, at Tom... at Janna? Wait! Where was Janna? All the rest of them were there, but the human witch seemed to have vanished not long after their host himself did. The remaining three, however, were looking intently at the mewman.

Slowly, the human boy begun walking towards her. Star swallowed, hard. “Marco... I... you... we... You have no idea how sorry I am! I know it changes nothing but...” He interrupted her, with a tight silent hug.

The boy held onto her like he feared that, if he let go, Star would no longer be there. She felt wet drops slide down her golden hair, just below where Marco had buried his face, and realized the boy was crying. Star’s heart raced inside her chest. Her first reflex was to hug Marco back, to hold onto him for dear life, and she did. She could hardly do otherwise. After all, he literally was one of the reasons why she had come back to life, maybe the main reason. Although, she realized, she would have done it for any of the others as well... even Janna.

Her second reflex, however, was to look up, apologetically, towards Jackie and Tom. She was very self-conscious of how the two of them might react to such a display between her and Marco, given all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. To her surprise, the human girl was smiling, and, well, so was the demon prince. Wait, what the here!? It made no sense! They were all forgiving her? Just like that? “A... aren’t you mad at me?” For what she had done. For what she had put them through.

“Furious,” muttered a voice in her ear, Marco’s. “But only about you scaring me like that! Nothing else matters, nothing at all as long as you are here, Star... I... I thought you were dead!”
“Well...” she commented, “...I think I kinda was.”

Instead of replying in words, Marco held her even more firmly. She reciprocated, running her hand reassuringly through his dark brown hair, still keenly aware of the two other teens in the room.

“Star, look,” said Jackie, “we have a lot to talk about. But, right now, I think we are all just glad to be alive, and glad that you are alive. That stuff, just now... it sort of puts the rest into perspective... you know?”

“But, it is all my fault!” Star cried. “I brought you all here! I...”

“I knew who Sam was!” shouted Tom, suddenly. All eyes fell on him. “I called him! I let us play his games! Janna, and Marco, and Jackie, and you, all of you messed up too, alright? I am not saying you didn’t. But I am the one who should have known better, and I went along with this regardless. Because, well, Sam had never harmed me in this way before, and I was too wrapped up thinking of him from my perspective. I am a fucking imbecile and, if you want to blame somebody, then blame me, Star! You saved your friends. I put them, and you, in danger... and I only did so to try to impress you...”

“Tom...” Star begun.

A soft laugh in her ear cut her off.

“Pfff, come on! That’s a load of crap, Tom,” muttered Marco. He let go of Star, briefly, and turned around to face the Lucitor prince. The demon looked very nervous, but kept both arms down. Star knew him well enough to realize he expected, and perhaps thought he deserved, a beating. “Tom, you told me the truth. You told me why you were doing this. Not to impress Star, but to help her. Remember? In the maps room? ‘We both do this for Star’? If you just wanted to impress her, or to win her back, then why even ask for my help? No, I call bullshit on that. You are a jerk, Tom, but not that kind of jerk. Besides, you did warn us about Sam, multiple times. I won’t claim we knew what we were getting into, but we knew it was dangerous!”

Tom blinked. Star blinked. Was Marco defending her ex? In a way, it made sense, Marco was a sweetheart, and Tom wasn’t really at fault for what happened last night. It had all been Star’s doing. Still, she was surprised that the human boy wasn’t angrier at the demon, just as she was surprised he wasn’t angrier at her.

“If anything,” Marco continued, “I am the one who dragged someone into hell for no valid reason.”

He turned around, towards his human girlfriend.

“Don’t you start with that one again!” scoffed Jackie. She looked annoyed and, for a second, almost hurt.

“But it is true,” he insisted. “If I had just packed and left, if I hadn’t told you about the trip, you wouldn’t have been dragged into this madness!”

Jackie frowned. She seemed unhappy about something that Star wasn’t quite able to place, and she was glancing at the mewman as much as she looked at Marco now. It wasn’t an angry stare, not exactly, it was a fearful and slightly hurt look, mixed with frustration. “Look, Marco, maybe now is not the time to...”

“You could have been safe and happy back on Echo Creek, dating any of a dozen guys that would have been a better boyfriend than me, if only I had simply left without saying anything. But, I
didn’t do that. I went and told you that you should stay back on Earth, precisely because I knew you would not accept that,” he admitted. “I said what I said to feel better about the fact that I was putting you in danger, in a way I could never have directly asked you to agree to. And you were almost... Oh god! ...the stuff you had to go through, Jackie! All because I was too selfish to leave you behind!”

“That wasn’t your call to make, Marco...” she begun testily, almost offended. She looked down at the glass sword she was holding, pointed down.

Star knew the last thing Jackie wanted right now was to be reminded of how helpless she had been, or to have her achievements in the previous battle minimized, even if she hadn’t really won. The mewman could easily empathize with that.

“But I just couldn’t do it!” Marco continued his confession. “I would have gone mad without you here, Jackie! I almost did. I had a horrible nightmare, a real one, a memory, last night, and I would have lost it if you hadn’t been there when I woke up! I would have lost it over a fucking dream, let alone all of the other stuff: this place, Hekapoo’s ghost, flying monsters, Sam... I made it through that whole horror show of a party, through that sickening feeling that my mind was slipping away, replaced by something angry and mean, again, by only focusing on keeping you safe. I failed to do that. I failed you. But still, you kept me sane.”

Star felt the urge to reciprocate Marco’s hug now, to be there for him. But it didn’t feel like her place and, besides, he wasn’t done speaking.

“Jackie, I feel like a jerk for everything I have put you through. But I can’t honestly say I wish you had stayed back in Echo Creek, because... because... because I need you,” he finished.

Jackie, professional cool person Jackie Lynn Thomas, implacable ‘why not?’ devil fighter Jackie Lynn Thomas, blushed a deep shade of pink. “Marco, I...”

They hugged, and they kissed, and Star smiled and sighed a very audible, “Awww!”

“But, well,” Jackie observed after they separated. “If I hadn’t come, Sam wouldn’t have had his excuse. So, well, trap or not...”

Star shook her head, and interrupted the girl before she tried blaming herself for something so absolutely out of her control. There was way too much of that going around, she realized. That thought helped put her own feelings on the matter in perspective.

“Listen, Jackie, Sam told me why he was doing this, sort of. I...” Her mind flashed back to burning worlds made of blue light, ‘cauterizing’ cosmic wounds, Sam’s destructive power raining fire over Mewni, and Earth, and Tom’s parents. Her thoughts hadn’t quite been her own while in butterfly mode but, now, the enormity of it all came crashing down on her: the literal weight of the world; worlds, actually. “It is a long story, and a really really important really really bad one. But it can wait. The point is that he was not just playing around. He wanted me to die, and to come back, and to go through this place. If it hadn’t been you, he would have found a different way to get what he wanted. Same goes for Tom, and, I suppose,” she finally admitted, “for me.”

They stood there, in silence, quietly pondering the fact that, in this particular case, it truly was no one’s fault but the devil. Not that they didn’t each have plenty of sins of their own to atone for, but the battle just now had been one of Sam’s design, and he did seem to always get what he wanted.

Then, suddenly, Star realized something.
“Wait, I am naked!” she yelled, moving both hands to cover herself. She wished she still had six of those. “Why did nobody tell me I was naked!?"

She had been naked right when she ‘resurrected’, and the clothes she had temporarily summoned during her fight with Sam had likely vanished the second her butterfly transformation had ended. So, Star realized, she had been having this entire conversation in the nude!

“Well, Star, it didn’t seem very important,” smiled Jackie. “After all, everyone in this room has seen you naked already.”

Star’s cheekmarks shone bright scarlet. The other girl just laughed. The princess was acutely aware that she deserved that dig and more. After a while, she chuckled too, apologetically. Things couldn’t be so bad between them if they could still joke at each other like that, she supposed.

----

The warm water around her slowly unknotted the iron-grip tension stored in the princess’ muscles. As she lied down inside the large tub in the bathroom of her room in Sam’s palace, the room that looked like her mom’s, she realized she wasn’t actually tired in any physical sense. She was stressed, emotionally overwhelmed, and also, she had seemly stretched her own magical ability far beyond its limits. She couldn’t so much as feel the magic around her, or the vast powers she knew were now pooled inside her new wand. She wasn’t worried. She knew the power would return to her in time. Or rather, she was worried precisely because she knew that would be the case.

It was two in the morning, but she wasn’t really sleepy. None of them were, apparently, according to what Marco had said before she excused herself to bathe and put on some clothes. They had agreed to meet after, to talk. The mewman had asked if they shouldn’t be trying to get some rest that night. The boy had remarked that he actually felt too energized, and far too spooked, to even try to sleep. Jackie and Tom had quickly agreed, and she was surprised to find herself in similar condition. Star had never before been able to cast any healing spells worth using. Yet, whatever she had done earlier that night seemed to have not only cured everyone’s wounds, but also been the equivalent of weeks of rest in terms of replenishing their strength.

She looked down at her feet through the surface of the water. She could almost picture a pair of black boots and a black and golden skirt over her knees. It made her uneasy. She could vaguely remember everything she had done and thought in her butterfly form. She could remember healing her friends, protecting them, coming back from the dead to save them. She could also remember her burning rage towards Sam, and the powers she had wielded against him.

The princess remembered the black tower she destroyed during their fight. Back on Earth, she had heard of titanic human constructions that her friends called skyscrapers, rising up above the very clouds. She had certainly never seen one in Echo Creek, and for all she knew, they existed only in legends, or they had been greatly exaggerated for her benefit. There were no clouds in Sam’s domain, but if there had been any, Star was sure they wouldn’t have reached one third of the way up that claw-like edifice. Pony Head’s entire kingdom did float above the clouds, but that merely meant its base started there; there was no building in Mewni that scrapped the firmament, not Butterfly Castle, nor any of the ancient monster temples. She wasn’t sure she knew a mountain half as tall, let alone any actual construction. Yet, she had used the huge fortification as a bludgeon!

That had just been her opening move, too. She had also summoned an army of shadow creatures that made all of her previous creations seem tame by comparison. And, she had enjoyed the rush of commanding that dark swarm far more than she was willing to admit to herself.

Star had been dealing with anger and frustration for a while now, processing the boiling burning
fury left in her heart after her mom’s death. She had been mad often enough. She had felt the pleasure of causing pain, and the feeling of strength that came from commanding powerful dark magics. But what she had felt during her transformation was entirely different. She had felt perfectly calm in the same breath as she held absolute hatred for her foe. She had felt powerful and in control, and yet, now she realized, she hadn’t even been in the driver’s seat of her own body, so to speak. She could remember everything she had done, but she hadn’t been the one doing it.

She had reached for the power below the void of her own free will, but everything from there until she transformed back was like being in a trance. The other Star had acted along her same priorities: it had protected her friends, it had done all it could to rain vengeance upon Sam. But, at the same time, it didn’t think like her. The princess wasn’t even sure it thought on a normal mewman level at all.

The words of the last spell she had cast didn’t help her feel any more at ease. ‘I seize my fate without remorse, I wish revenge and stay my course, for just one spark of divine might, that sets the skies themselves alight’. Who in their right mind would cast a spell that went like that? She liked the skies as they were, thank you very much!

But, of course, that was a lie. She had come back to life with the thought that she was willing to burn dimensions to the ground if only she could save Marco and her friends in exchange. She had a sick feeling she might one day soon be held to her word.

Star hugged her legs against her body. Oh god! She came back from the dead! She had been dead. She probably should have stayed dead! And now... it was too much too handle, way too much.

A knock on the bathroom’s door interrupted her before she couldn’t even begin to cry.

“Ah, Star, can I come in?” a voice followed the knock.

“Tom?!” she replied, shocked. “No! You can’t, I am in the shower!”

“I, yeah, I know that, Star,” the demon prince stammered behind the door. “But, like Jackie said, nothing I haven’t seen,” she blushed, “and this is sort of important. Before you talk to them... there is something I need to say.”

Star frowned, stood up momentarily, and pulled the curtain all the way closed around the tub. With a careless splashing ‘plopth!’ she sat back inside the warm water. “Ok, Tom, sure, whatever, come on in.”

She really hoped he got that last night had been a mistake, and should definitely be a one time thing. The mewman had probably been somewhat cruel to use her ex that way in the first place, but she thought she had made it amply clear that it didn’t mean they were back to being any sort of ‘a thing’, and that he had agreed to that. There had been a very specific set of non-repeating circumstances that had led to her doing something like that. Circumstances like not being sure whether or not she was turning into an evil cold inhuman creature that only cared for causing pain and... ok, fine, maybe not that uncommon circumstances for her. But, even if she felt the same now, that didn’t mean repeating last night actions was a good idea. If Tom was trying to come on to her again, then all she need to do was to politely...

“Star, I just want to make sure we are on the same page about last night,” the demon prince spoke as he closed the door behind himself. “It was dumb, and it should never ever happen again, alright?”

“Wait, what?!” the mewman asked, surprised, abruptly sitting up straight inside the tub. “Why
“Eh... wait! Star, I thought you also felt it was a mistake...” Tom replied in a confused tone.

“Yeah, well, sure,” Star admitted, slowly relaxing back to her default resting position, head barely above the surface of the water. “But I still want to know why *you* wouldn’t want to do it again...” Ok, alright, she *knew* she was being childish.

There was a slight pause.

“There are a lot of reasons, Star. One is that you love Marco, not me. I don’t think I want to play at being his replacement. It is been pointed out to me that that is not a good position to be in, and I think it would just make it harder for you two to patch things up if I am in the picture. Besides, the guy just stood up for me down there, I’d feel like even more of an asshole than usual if I kept getting in the way of the two of you,” he explained. “That’s why it was urgent that I explain this now, before you talk to him. Do you understand?”

Right. Because him visiting her in the shower was definitely the right way to show there wasn’t anything going on between the two of them anymore… The princess sighed. She knew Tom well enough to know his heart was in the right place, this time around, and that he was being honest. The demon prince was just sort of socially clueless sometimes.

“Tom, I am not sure I can patch things with Marco after all I have done...” mused Star.

“Sure you can!” he reassured her. “He wants to patch things with you, you want to patch things with him, and Jackie apparently wants you all to patch things as well.” That was news to Star, maybe something the human girl had said after the princess left? “You just need to be willing to admit where you messed up, and be willing to listen to how they feel about it and make amends. But, well... I feel like an ostrich giving flying lessons. You know this stuff better than I do. All I can really advice, from experience, is not going off at them about how their feelings are unfair to you...” he added bitterly.

There was a brief pause while Star put two and two together. “Did you and Janna...?”

“Yeah,” Tom admitted, with a sigh. “We broke up. I mean, she dumped me, and, well, I don’t blame her.”

“God, Tom, I am so sorry!” the princess jumped out of the tub. Then, realizing she was naked and wet, and how terrible of a mixed signal it would be to try to comfort her ex with a hug, she just stood behind the curtain, lamely. “I really am. I never should have...”

“It’s not your fault, Star. It’s mine,” he reassured her. “All I had to do is to say no, or even be less of a prick about fucking up after. I just, well, I just never appreciated what I had until it was gone... Big shocker, right? Who would have guessed that with me?” he added, sarcastically. “Um, don’t take this the wrong way, but I would take still having Janna over what happened last night, any time.”

“Well, that was oversharing somewhat,’ thought the princess, frowning. But it’s not like it didn’t make sense, she had her own regrets about that night, after all.

“So, you are going to try to win her back, right?” Star asked. It was the kind of thing Tom did, after all. Admittedly, with mixed results. But he was certainly getting better at a lot of what went into it. “Do you even know where she is now?”

Star assumed Janna was safe after their battle with Sam, and just didn’t want to talk to any of them,
but she wasn’t entirely sure of where she was hiding. Maybe her and Tom’s shared room?

“I... I had Marco do his magic thing to find her,” Tom answered, guiltily. “She won’t talk to me, but she is fine.”

Marco’s magic thing? Star had really missed on a lot of stuff regarding her bestie, her presumptive boyfriend. She felt terrible, realizing that Tom was more up to date with Marco’s life than she was. But that wasn’t the topic now. “She will. Give her time.”

“No, she won’t,” Tom corrected her. “You have no idea of how long Janna can hold a grudge.”

She had some, actually.

“Besides, even if she did,” the demon prince continued. “I don’t really want to get back with her either. I think, well, I think I really need some time to be alone and work on myself.”

Wow. That was really mature of the demon prince. Well, by his standards, in any case. Star often had to remind herself that he was old enough to have lived through the reign of Queen Solena. Maybe Star also needed time alone? No, she had tried that lately, and look where it got her. What she needed was to be upfront with her friends.

“Tom...” she trailed on. A few heavy quiet seconds passed. “... I am still sorry, about everything.”

“Yeah, so am I,” he replied.

Another long pause.

Finally, she broke the silence, “Mhmm, so, Tom, can you pass me the towel?”

After all, she couldn’t get out to get it while she was naked and he was there. Or, rather, she shouldn’t.

A purple hand passed through the curtain, holding a long fuzzy blue towel. The demon prince made no attempt to peek inside. Star carefully adjusted the towel around herself, and came out of the shower. She proceeded to find a second, smaller, towel, wrapping it around her blond hair.

“So, Star, just out of curiosity, last night...” Tom begun, his mouth forming a half smile to the side, showing a single playful fang. “… did I do better than Marco?”

Star groaned at the question. So much for him being mature.

----

“Well, come on, dude, what are you waiting for,” Jackie prodded Marco on.

In truth, she was as nervous about this as the boy was, if not more. She was afraid she was doing this for all the wrong reasons. She glanced at the glass blade she was holding. It had nothing to do with this, but, for some reason, it felt reassuring. Not as a weapon, but as the proof that she was stronger than others thought, than she herself once thought. It was a reminder that she wasn’t doing this out of surrender or self-loathing, but out of strength and love.

Marco knocked at the door. It was unlocked. It wasn’t even truly closed, just propped barely ajar. It swung open as he hit it, revealing a still naked Star, clad only in a long blue bath towel, sitting in bed, combing her hair. Besides her was Tom, in his black ‘scoundrel’ outfit. Their smiles faded the moment they spotted her and Marco. Tom, in particular, looked downright terrified.
“Shit! Marco, man, I... Would you believe me this is not what it looks like?!” the demon prince pleaded.

Jackie eyed her boyfriend nervously. He had removed the armor from Sam’s costume, keeping only the brown trousers and boots, and left his own sword back in their room. He seemed a bit surprised to see Tom there, but forced an uneasy smile.

“Actually, Tom,” the human boy said. “I am glad you are here. It is probably good for all four of us to talk. I mean, if you and Star are going to be together too...”

Tom blinked. Star stifled a chuckle. Then, Tom began laughing too. Marco frowned. Jackie knew it had taken him a lot of courage to actually propose that. Some time ago, he had been the one who said it wouldn’t be fair for Star not to be able to open up the relationship on her end too, given he got both Star and herself. Still, she knew Marco was not entirely at ease with the idea. Not yet, in any case. There was a big difference between a theoretical ‘someone else’, and the reality of Tom and Star being a thing and its implications for all of them.

“I mean,” Marco corrected himself, “assuming Star and I are also still... dunno, I don’t want to presume anything. I guess I am just saying it’d be good to talk...”

“Actually, Marco, you three have stuff to talk about; without me.” The demon prince walked up to a stammering Marco and gave him a strong pat on the back. “Look, I am sorry about yesterday, and I appreciate what you are offering. It is more than I would do for you, actually. But I shouldn’t be dating anyone right now, let alone get involved with the three of you! ...no offence. I already talked with Star, and we are just friends, nothing more. For real this time.”

He walked past the two humans, and through the door. He pulled the handle from outside the room, without looking back. Right before it was fully closed, he stopped and added, “Marco... don’t mess it up.” He slammed the door behind him.

The three remaining teens stared at each other. Finally, Star broke the ice, “so... ah, you got rid of the shackles?” she asked Jackie.

She had. Even if the rest of her clothes were still that crappy slave costume. They didn’t seem to affect her mind much now, they were just sort of itchy.

“Yeah, dude, turns out this thing can cut through iron,” she waved the crystal rapier, carefully. It actually had a very sharp edge, and the point could pierce stone. She had just tried it out. “The only downside is that it doesn’t come with a scabbard.”

Well, and that it was literally a gift from the devil. Jackie was like two thirds certain that would come up to bite her later. She still couldn’t let go of her prize, though.

“I... I think I can help with that, Jackie,” spoke Star.

She grabbed her new wand, which Jackie just now had the chance to fully admire. It looked so much more badass than her old wand, and that had been badass enough. With a flick of the mewman’s wrist and some word soup incantation, a polished gold and nacre scabbard appeared around Jackie’s sword. In the center, a golden seashell with a crown acted as the main piece for the metallic pattern.

“You know, for Prince Jack,” Star explained.

Jackie flinched involuntarily, remembering her dream.
“Did... did I do something wrong?” questioned Star. She seemed a bit paler after casting the spell, and carefully put down the wand on the bedside table, drying the sweat of her palm against the towel.

The human girl shook her head. “Not at all. Thanks, Star. It is just, look, this is all way too awkward still,” she sighed. “I think... maybe what we need to do is to take turns saying how we each feel, what we want, and what we are bothered about. I can start, if that makes it easier,” she offered, uncertain.

“Actually, Jackie, can I start?” asked Star. Jackie nodded, she had no objection to that. She just had felt it was her responsibility, since she brought up the idea. “I am scared. Really really scared,” the mewman explained. “I am scared of myself. I have been feeling a lot of very bad things since my mom was killed, and it actually doesn’t excuse any of my behavior, but, sometimes, it is more than I can handle. I feel I am really going dark, like the prophecy says I will. Hell, after today, I am worried I am not even going to be me once I go dark...”

She told them about her transformation, about not being exactly herself while she was in butterfly mode. Jackie had to admit it was far worse stuff than she had expected. Star also told them about being dead, and Sam’s goals, and his purpose. She told them about his threat that he would burn Earth and Mewni and Tom’s domain to ashes if Star didn’t take out the thing that killed her mom. She told them a lot about how she felt the last few days, about her dream, about Sam’s speech to her inside that dream.

Jackie wondered for a moment if her own dream had truly been just her own subconscious talking to her or, perhaps, yet another of Sam’s mind games. She wasn’t sure. The questions ‘Prince Jack’ had raised were not entirely foreign to her own fears, if she was being honest, so either case was quite plausible.

“Guilt is not useless,” pointed out Marco, calmly, as Star finished her tale. His face was twisted into a concerned frown. “How you feel about the stuff you do matters. Because, if you don’t care about the bad things you have done in the past, then you have no reason to do better in the future, no real drive behind the commitment to avoid the same errors. That is not the same as never forgiving your own mistakes, or spending your whole life reliving them. But, still, sometimes the guilt is what makes you remember your failures, so that the lessons truly stick, so that you can do better the next time around.”

He sounded harsher, and older, and more personally familiar with the matter than he should have been.

“What about the mistake of sleeping with Tom?” pointed out an embarrassed Star, looking down at her knees from her sitting position.

“That’s not really a big deal,” said Marco, tentatively. Then, he corrected himself, “well, not on a grand moral scale. It is definitely not like you should necessarily make it a priority to remember it as a big lesson, or anything like that. That’s not the kind of thing I was talking about, ok?”

He sighed, and continued, “But, at the same time, I guess that for this to work, I probably do need to be honest and say what it meant to me, personally. Well... it hurt, and it was shocking, and I almost feel dumb that it matters to me, after everything else we have been through. But the reason it does matter to me, I think, is that I don’t understand the why. Both why you did it, and why you didn’t talk to us about it before, or after.”

“Because I was in pain, and full of horrible thoughts, and I didn’t want you to have to deal with them,” admitted Star. “Tom could handle that. He is a demon. Look, Marco, I love you, I want to
be around you with every fiber of my being. But, in that one instance, Tom could help me deal with stuff you couldn’t, that you shouldn’t have to deal with. It doesn’t excuse what I did and, in the future, I will deal with that myself without doing something like that. But I can’t bear having you exposed to all the stuff that’s wrong with me right now... so, I got lonely, and maybe a bit... well, so Tom, ok? Like I said, it was a mistake. I am sorry. I never wanted you two to see that, that was precisely the point. I thought that stuff was over too, the seeing stuff. I haven’t seen you two in a while… wasn’t sure if there just hadn’t been anything to see, or… mmm, never mind, none of my business.”

Marco blinked. “Is that all?”

Star nodded.

“Then, can it be my turn to talk?” he asked. The two girls nodded together then. “I have been in prison and I have killed a man. Well, probably many many more than one, but only one I can remember so far. And, for the record, Star, I also have some experience with the feeling that a darker angrier version of myself is taking my body for a joyride...”

Star and Jackie listened with open jaws to Marco’s story. About the way the memories came back after Hekapoo’s memory seal begun fading. About the rituals. About using the Finding Ritual to induce yesterday’s nightmare, and what the nightmare actually contained. About the Fierceness Ritual, and the little girl, and the ugly man, and the even uglier things Marco had done to him.

“... and, of course, who knows what else is still hidden away in those sixteen years,” he concluded. “So, Star, if you want to sleep with Tom because you are having a good time of it, or like him, or find him attractive, I say do it... just maybe give us heads up, at least if we are still going to be together? But if you are doing it because you think I can’t handle the stuff you have been going through, then let me know, and we can compare notes about how messed up we both are. There might not be skies ablaze in my future, but there are apparently plenty of skeletons in my past, and I don’t think I have even begun digging them all out.”

Jackie walked to Marco and put a hand on his shoulder, trying to reassure the boy. Star then walked up from the bed, and headed towards them. Jackie drew back as the mewman princess proceeded to hug the human boy. She drew him into a close trembling embrace.

“Oh, Marco, I am so so sorry,” Star said. “I had no idea. And... and once again, all of that is also my...”

“It is not your fault,” he interrupted her before she could continue down that path. “I chose to challenge Hekapoo, I chose to go after her. Plus, there was no reasonable way you could have foreseen any of that. When I said guilt is not useless, I didn’t meant that you should blame yourself for things you had no control over, either, Star. And, also, it is not necessarily a bad thing that I went through that. If those sixteen years hadn’t happened, we would not have had a way to find our lead towards Hekapoo. I still don’t know what else is buried there, but I got a feeling we might need more of those rituals in the future, even with you around. I think it was all worth it, if it means I can be there for you now.”

They hugged even tighter. Jackie remained quiet. It still didn’t feel like her turn.

“Marco, that’s the thing, I am still not sure you can,” Star argued. “Earlier, before the party, I was thinking about all the danger I keep putting you all in, and that was even before Sam went all ‘judgment day’ on us... I can’t ask you, any of you, to keep risking your lives like this.”

“Star, you are not asking, we are just coming with you either way,” the boy answered, winking at
Besides, given what you said about Sam’s threat, our lives are all in danger, whether we follow you or not. Hell, the lives of our families, of everyone in Echo Creek, of all of Earth and Mewni, are in danger. If there is even the slightest chance that me, or any of us, being with you is the difference between success and failure, then what you cannot ask is for us to sit back and do nothing. Also, I really can’t imagine letting my best friend, or the girl I love, go through all of this alone."

Jackie coughed.

“One of the girls I love,” Marco corrected himself. They all chuckled, Jackie a bit more nervously than the other two, but they didn’t seem to notice.

“Ok, talking really did feel a lot better,” Star said, somewhat surprised. “Now your turn, Jackie. Spill them! What kind of stuff is troubling you? And, on scale from Ingrid hearing she can’t borrow a battle axe to Miss Skullnick after math finals, how angry are you at me right now?”

Jackie blinked. No least because that first thing about Ingrid sounded like it was based on a real story, one for which she was decidedly missing some context. Well, now was not really the time to ask.

The girl took a deep breath, and thought of all the things that bothered her. The main thing, the thing that she for sure had to bring up, was her fear that Marco liked Star more than herself. She didn’t mind that Marco loved Star, she knew that. But maybe she felt a bit uneasy, thinking that he thought she was cooler, or got him better, or, well, that she was his real main squeeze, and Jackie was the nice-to-have. If that was the case, that was hardly the end, but it might mean some adjustments to how she saw her own relationship with Marco, for her own sake. In any case, it was obviously something that she should be getting some clarity on, sooner rather than later, whatever the answer ended up being.

“Well, I am still angry that you were spying on us for so long without telling us, Star,” she said, chickening out.

Wow, Jackie Lynn-Thomas, way to be a hypocrite! This whole ‘talking about our deepest fears and wants’ thing had been her idea, after all. Still, it wasn’t like the scrying thing didn’t bother her too. Perhaps it was easier to address that one first, and then move on to the other, thornier, stuff.

“I... I am sorry, Jackie, again, I really am,” Star repeated, rubbing her hand against the back of her head. “I mean, about not telling you two. I really have no excuse there. I guess I was just too much of a coward. I was afraid of, well, of this, of you hating me, I guess...”

“I didn’t say I hated you, Star. I said I was angry,” Jackie clarified. Ironically, right now she could easily understand being afraid of bringing up something like that. She really could. Maybe she was being too harsh on the princess? The whole thing seemed like ages ago, given all that had happened in the in-between. Still, she had to admit it bothered her some, “I guess the truth is, besides the trust issue, the idea of you seeing... well, you know... it’s... it’s really weird, Star. I guess I might not show it much of a coward. I was afraid of, well, of this, of you hating me, I guess...”

“I didn’t say I hated you, Star. I said I was angry,” Jackie clarified. Ironically, right now she could easily understand being afraid of bringing up something like that. She really could. Maybe she was being too harsh on the princess? The whole thing seemed like ages ago, given all that had happened in the in-between. Still, she had to admit it bothered her some, “I guess the truth is, besides the trust issue, the idea of you seeing... well, you know... it’s... it’s really weird, Star. I guess I might not show it much, but it actually makes me sort of self-conscious, alright? I think Marco feels similarly. That’s why we haven’t been, well, you know... Knowing you are, or would be, watching, well, it makes things pretty damn awkward for me.”

“Yeah, totally, totally...” nodded Star, nervously. “I get it, and I am sorry. But, also, after the first time, I just didn’t have any control over it, I swear...”

“I guess I kinda know what that feels like now,” remarked Jackie. She glanced at Marco who was just flustered enough for her to tell he got what she was talking about.
“Riiight, Tom,” Star mused. She made a face like she wanted the ground to swallow her up. “Guess that makes us a bit more even, in a way?” she offered, cautiously.

A thought occurred then to Jackie. It was the most counter-intuitive weird thought possible. It made no sense. It was the very thing that she was angry about, combined with the thing she was really afraid of, and yet, it made her, well, it made her curious. What she wanted to do now was all kinds of messed up. It was not reasonable, it was doubtful that it would be helpful, and it was, frankly, not very nice. She wanted to actually get even.

She looked at the golden seashell in the middle of the nacre scabbard. ‘Why not?’ she thought.

“No, I don’t think we are, Star,” Jackie noted. “We are not even. I mean, you cast the spell, and spied on us, and then your spell caused us to watch you. It was all your doing. So, I don’t think that counts as even. Look, Star, I forgive you. Right now. I do. So you don’t need to feel forced to do this. But we are not even. Do you actually want to be even?” she smiled. It was sort of a wicked smile, at least by her standards.

Star’s eyes narrowed. In another time, the mewman might have had eagerly agreed to anything in order to soothe her guilty conscience. But the princess was no longer as naive as she once had been, if she had ever truly been so. For a second, she looked a lot like her colder self from the last few weeks, and Jackie began to regret pushing her buttons. Star eyed her up and down. Cautiously, she asked “How?”

Jackie breathed in and forced herself to remain calm. “I get to look this time, on my terms.”


Marco was shooting his human girlfriend an even more incredulous stare, like she had suddenly grown a second head.

“You and Marco,” she explained. “Look, you don’t have to do this. I am not going to hold the spying thing over your head forever either way, Star, what’s done is done.” That was true. “… I guess I was just joking.” That wasn’t.

Star looked down, embarrassed. “Well, ah, Jackie... why do you want to see that?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Jackie admitted, also nervous, but feeling a bit better now that she saw the princess’ reaction. The mewman’s voice was hesitant, but not angry or resentful. “But, I sort of do. I mean, maybe this is not a good thing to bring up now, what with all the other stuff. You two are talking about the fate of the world, and I bring this up... I guess it was a stupid idea... and if you don’t want to…”

Jackie realized that she was rambling. ‘So that’s how being Marco feels!’, she thought to herself, a silent anxious quip.

“I am in,” interrupted Star, still not lifting her gaze from the floor. “I am in if Marco is in. But, I still don’t get it, Jackie. What does that have to do with anything?”

“I don’t know,” repeated the human girl truthfully.

Perhaps it was her way of confronting the thing she was really afraid of. Star and Tom had been weird to watch. It had been a surprise, and it had been upsetting, mostly because Jackie was worried that would hurt Marco. But it didn’t tell her much. It didn’t tell her if what Marco and Star had was much different from what she and Marco had. And, it was not like it had to be the same, in order for what the two humans had to be good too. But, well, still… she just had to know.
Chapter End Notes

Non-creepy Star is back! Sort of... partly... Also, yes, this entire chapter acts as the set up for the final smut scene of Part III. What? Didn't you all realize this is still just some porn with plot? ;)

Chapter Summary

In which there is love making, fucking, fuckedupness, and mind-fuckery, not necessarily in that order.

Chapter Notes

Porn... with plot

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 29: 赤い月

The silence was thick enough you could probably cut it with a battle axe. The only sound was that of Star’s own heart, as it thumped loudly inside her chest. Honestly, Jackie’s idea did sound pretty crazy. But, at the same time, Star realized that she wanted to do this. She missed Marco. She missed excitement, and fun, and weird, and awesome, and all the joyous bright feelings that she always felt when she was around her best friend. The kind of feelings that seemed to have been displaced by a dreadful emptiness ever since they returned from St. O’s. And, ok, she specifically missed sex with Marco too, alright? And Marco kisses. She could always use more Marco kisses.

She had spent two weeks with her heart frozen solid with anger and determination. It had led her only to pain and to death. Pain and death might still be in the horizon, closer to all of them than they could possibly imagine. But not right now, not tonight. After coming back to life, Star wanted to feel alive even more than she ever did before, and that was saying quite something!

It wasn’t that she was ignoring how bad or how serious things were. She knew they were bad, really bad. But there would be time for that tomorrow. Sam was not going to destroy them or their homes today and, while they were inside his domain, they remained safe from anything else that wished to harm them. That much hadn’t changed. It gave them one more night of calm in the eye of the storm.

So, for now, she could do with figuring out if things between her and Marco were not completely torn to shreds after the last few weeks, if they could even go back to how things felt, before St. O’s. She could do with feeling the boy’s hands on her body, his lips against hers, his... well, you got the idea! She could really do with some ‘happy we are alive tonight’ sex. That is, if Marco was up for it.

Right now, however, the boy seemed to be looking back and forth between the two girls. That whole air of Marco being older and wiser, which he had had just a few minutes ago? Gone! He was back to being the awkward boy he had always been. Which was, usually, like super cute and everything. But, right now, it was mostly making Star herself way too nervous about the whole thing.
Jackie had grabbed a chair, sat calmly on it, propped her sheathed sword against the wall, and now smiled at the two of them, expectantly.

“Marco,” Star asked, “do you want to do this? It’s fine if you don’t...”

“Yeah...” he answered, uncertain.  “I mean, yeah, I do. It’s just... I... Damn, this is like every guy’s fantasy, and I can’t figure out how to start... even though I guess it is the same as any other time... I... I suppose I am just having a bit of a... Marco moment,” he stammered, and let out a small sigh. There was a faint chuckle from a chair near the wall.

“How about,” Jackie spoke behind him. Star noticed the human girl winking at her. “How about I tell you how to start?”

Marco nodded, bashfully, “Ah, yeah, ok...”

“Alright, Marco,” the human girl spoke. Her voice sounded a lot more confident than it had mere moments ago. It sounded like Jackie again, the mewman thought. “First things first: go sit besides Star on the bed. You are not getting anything done just standing there, dude!” She chuckled good-naturedly. Star noticed the other girl was still blushing softly. The boy, of course, couldn’t see that just yet, since he was still facing the other way, towards her.

Marco walked up to where Star was sitting, and sat himself, a bit too rigidly, besides her.

“Good, now, turn to look at her,” Jackie commanded him, clearly enjoying her role as improvised puppet master. She said nothing for a while. Star stared into Marco’s eyes. The princess bit her lip, in anticipation. Right then, she heard Jackie say: “Kiss her.”

She felt Marco’s lips on hers, his hands around her back, brushing gently against her wings under the towel. She gasped, and kissed him back, hungrily. She hugged his back and pressed herself against his shirtless torso, feeling the heat of his body through the towel. The kiss seemed to last forever, and yet not nearly long enough. She missed this, and he apparently missed her too! Once they finally separated, they were both staring at each other’s broad bright smile.

“Wow, nice going there, Diaz!” Star heard Jackie exclaim, and her cheekmarks went red with a nervous blush. It only got like five times worse, after she heard the next instruction. “Ok, now, take off that towel.”

Marco effortlessly unknotted the blue towel from over her shoulder, and let it fall. His eyes were glued to her famously small breasts. “Marco, you have seen those before!” she protested. He had seen them just now, right after the fight, actually. They all had.

“Well, I don’t think I ever truly got a good look,” Jackie pointed out. “Marco... show me.”

She felt Marco’s lips on hers, his hands around her back, brushing gently against her wings under the towel. She gasped, and kissed him back, hungrily. She hugged his back and pressed herself against his shirtless torso, feeling the heat of his body through the towel. The kiss seemed to last forever, and yet not nearly long enough. She missed this, and he apparently missed her too! Once they finally separated, they were both staring at each other’s broad bright smile.

“Ok, now touch them, and lick her neck,” the other girl commanded, and Marco complied. Star looked at the other girl increduously. But, as she let herself become lost in the sensations, her earlier questions and concerns were quickly forgotten. Of his own initiative, Marco gently bit her left earlobe. She gasped.

Jackie’s eyes went wide with surprise, and she reached out towards her own left ear. “Star, what
“What was what?” the princess asked. Marco stopped, confused.

“I felt that!” Jackie explained. “Maybe I am imagining things, but...”

“Oh?” Star blinked, then smiled broadly towards Jackie. “Oh. Oooohhh! I... I think I know what is happening! Jackie, let me show you something super cool!” she exclaimed. “Marco, my breasts... lick at them!” she commanded enthusiastically, her earlier hesitation overpowered by her eagerness to show the other girl something really awesome.

Marco seemed hesitant for a moment there. Star simply turned to face him and proudly presented her own chest as an invitation, forgetting all previous considerations about the size of the ‘treat’ she offered. She pointed both her fingers at her nipples, just in case he needed help finding them. “My boobs, Marco Diaz, if you please.”

“Well, I mean,” Jackie chuckled, “It’s what I was going to ask for next, so...”

The boy shrugged and smiled, and begun kissing along the slow rising edge of two tiny but sensitive mounds of flesh. Star closed her eyes, and focused on just feeling things, her mouth vocalizing unconscious purrs of pleasure. Yeah, yeah, irresponsible, dark magic, not a toy, yada yada. But, well, she had to show this to Jackie! She was going to flip!

The mewman let herself feel the texture of Marco’s tongue against her skin, the anticipation of his ever closer circular laps around her nipples, the urgency of long postponed sensations, the building arousal between her legs. She could also perceive something else, shimmering invisible around her, and inside her. She could feel Marco’s desire as well as her own, and also...

She heard a gasp coming from the chair, and opened her eyes to grin knowingly at Jackie. “So! You felt that too! Right? Right!?"

The human’s nipples, pointing visibly through even the unflattering brown fabric of her costume, were almost proof enough. Although, of course, maybe she just liked watching. The princess could have empathized with that, after all. Not that she would admit to it, of course! Still, Star didn’t think it was just an effect of the view.

“How?” Jackie asked, as calmly as anyone possibly could in that situation.

“Well, it’s the link,” Star explained. Then, upon seeing the girl’s puzzled look, and Marco’s, she added, “the thing that makes me see you two? I guess this confirms that it works the same both ways. I should have known after the Tom thing. But, well, the thing is, maybe I never mentioned this but... I can’t only see things... I... I feel them...”

“You have been feeling us having sex!” Jackie shouted, shocked and flustered.

“Yeah... I... I am sorry. I should have...” Star begun stammering. It just occurred to her that showing off like this was a bad idea, given that Jackie was not quite over the whole spying thing in the first place.

“Yeah, of course you are,” Jackie rolled her eyes. But she didn’t seem too much more pissed than before. Possibly because, if she had felt half of what Star had felt, she was likely just a tad bit too revved up to care right now. “Ok, Star, anything else you want to confess to and/or show me?” she asked, playfully.

“Oh, yeah, actually.” The princess tried to contain her enthusiasm. Jackie was in for a treat, and
“Yes, Star?” he asked with a grin. His hand somehow found its way to casually rest atop her left thigh, the base of his thumb practically at waist level. It gave her the best kind of goosebumps. “Want me to keep going?”

It was clear that he too was getting into this. Still, tempting as letting him pleasure her was, she had an even better idea.

“Well, Jackie thought, it was not like having Marco fully naked, rather than just shirtless, wasn’t a plus for her (particularly given the view she now had of that fine fine ass!). But, she actually felt a little bit worried about this now. Marco making Star feel good was something she could handle. Honestly? It made her feel proud of him in a hard to pin down way. Besides, it was hard to complain about that, since, apparently, she got to feel the same things as the princess did, or something close enough. But Star giving Marco a blowjob? That was different, somehow. What if it turned out that the mewman was super amazing at it? What if, from now on, every time Jackie was giving Marco head she would have to worry that she might not be up to standard?

Not that it was a bad thing if Star made Marco see heaven, of course. Good for him! Still, Jackie wasn’t sure she wanted to know that for sure…

The human girl was not a very possessive person, and she did not consider herself jealous in the usual sense. On the other hand, a competitive streak was something she was willing to admit to. So, the idea of what she was about to see, and the thought of how she herself might or might not measure up, did give her some pause. She wondered how Star felt about this whole thing. More than that, she would have loved to know Marco’s thoughts on the matter.

Marco looked down at Star, then back up at Jackie. She forced herself to meet his eyes.

He was still staring at her when the princess begun licking the tip of his cock. The reason Jackie knew this, incidentally, was that she felt the princess lips around her own... well... not hers, per se, she didn’t actually have one of those! It was still Marco’s cock. Still, Jackie felt everything the boy felt! She could not only perceive the raw sensations, but the jumble of excited feelings inside the boy’s mind. Not his thoughts, after all, but some basic emotional building blocks: happiness, pride, excitement, acceptance, transgression, and a big fat serving of hot blooded horniness. She had wanted, and dreaded, to know how Marco felt about Star, and how he felt about her. She was perhaps about to find out...

There was a flash in the back of her mind, a flash of the color green. But she was only vaguely aware of that, because, at the same time, she felt something hot and wet swallow a hard shaft that felt like her very own. It felt good. It felt really good. Not as intense as someone sucking on her clit might have felt, more diffuse, but also more bearable. There was little risk here of the sensation...
tipping over into painful overstimulation. It just built up inside her, higher and higher. An excitement. A pressure.

She felt powerful, and realized that was all Marco. She learned that, as kind and timid as the boy sometimes was, there was something about getting a blowjob from a fucking princess, while the hottest girl in school watched and fidgeted in her seat from her own arousal, that fulfilled some primal power fantasies. Fantasies he might not even have known he had, that he would never dare admit to her even if he ever admitted them to himself. She felt him feel guilty in an unfocused vague way, so she winked at him, and licked her finger suggestively. ‘Dude, enjoy this, bask in it. I like it too,’ she thought at him. She suspected that, even with the link, he still couldn’t actually read her mind, but what was the harm in trying?

She felt giddy, and realized that was Star, naughtily anticipating not only making Marco come, as she licked all around his cock and applied pressure up and down with her tightly pursed lips, but also surprising Jackie. She realized Star could also feel Marco’s sensations. She wasn’t sure how she knew. Probably because she felt the mewman feel them, in addition to the direct feedback from the boy. She learned then that the princess also had a competitive edge to herself, that she wanted to show off to Jackie. It was not at all intended to be in an overly mean way - at least, it didn’t feel so - but it still made the human girl uneasy.

She wondered if they could feel anything back from herself, at all. Or if the fact that she wasn’t participating kept her own feelings private. After all, that was the intent of their little game: they were on display, and she wasn’t. Not this time. They got their power-high from showing off to her. She got hers from watching them while she remained unexposed. Or, she realized, given the magical weirdness involved, less exposed.

She felt Star pick up the pace. She heard Marco gasp. For the first time she understood the sensation of having a pair of full balls and to desperately yearn to empty them. She sought the boy’s gaze, pleading him to maintain eye contact as he exploded inside the other girl’s mouth. She realized that was a subtler power fantasy of her own. He did. Star slurped, loudly.

“So, are we even?” Star turned to ask her. The mewman’s cheekmarks were glowing like freaking traffic lights, clearly just as turned on as she was embarrassed.

“Yeah, dude,” Jackie said, feeling unsteady. “We are. Wow. That was... what was it that you say? ‘Weird-awesome’?” She laughed, nervously. “Thanks, you two. I kinda always wanted to know how it felt from that side,” she admitted.

“Wait, Star,” gasped Marco finally. “Jackie might have let you off the hook here, but we are not even yet. I think I need to, at least, return the favor.”

Star bit her lip, glanced at Jackie apologetically, and got atop the bed, laying on the opposite end from where Marco was seated, slowly opening her legs.

----

Marco had missed this. He had missed Star. He had missed the sex, definitely, but, even more, he had missed things being ok between them. He had missed her smile, her happy mischievousness, the sound of her laughter... and he had missed making her squirm as he licked her cunt. What? He was a red-blooded human guy just like any other, after all!

Right now, he was taking great delight in the fact that Star kept shuffling around, trying to press herself against his mouth, as he took the time to lick around the border between her thighs and her outer lips. Star was always impatient, but he knew it was better to take things just a little bit slower
than that. He kept teasing her for a while. Then, eventually, he begun running a flat tongue over the middle of her sex, warming her up for what followed. He heard Star gasp, and then, right after, Jackie too.

Holy crap! If Ferguson or Alfonzo ever heard about this, they were going to spontaneously combust from envy alone. Marco felt like such a stud, pleasing two girls at the exact same time, making both of them hot and bothered out of their minds, using every trick he knew worked on either of them. He doubted in all of his years roaming Hekapoo’s dimension, even with muscles, dragoncycle, and all that, he had ever felt quite as manly as he did now.

He felt Star’s breath quicken, and he picked up the pace to match, starting to trace circles inwards and upwards with his tongue. He grabbed her legs as she began to tremble. “Marcoooo...” she gasped. A pair of superhumanly strong hands began pressing his face down, holding it in place.

He heard Star moan, and Jackie pant softly. It was weird, he had never made the comparison in his mind about how each of his girlfriends sounded in bed, but now that he could do the side by side test, the differences stood out clear as day. Interestingly, it seemed that they both were at about the same point towards their climax. Of course, for Jackie, he had only her partly restrained grunts to go by, whereas with Star, he actually felt the sensations as she did. He used those to guide his pace and direction.

Perhaps the link, however it worked, transferred not only the sensations, but the arousal itself from Star to Jackie, because it didn’t seem as if either of them was likely to finish before the other. It hadn’t worked that way when they had seen Star and Tom together, not quite. But maybe it had to do with proximity, or sight, or time. He could hear Jackie’s noises becoming louder and louder, and he knew for a fact the mewman was practically there. He slowed down, just slightly, then, just moments after, speed up again.

He would be lying if he said having seen Star with Tom didn’t bring out a competitive edge of sorts in him, a desire to do better than Tom. ‘Point Diaz’ and all that. Not that he was ever going to tell his girlfriend that. Still, with such an advantage as feeling what Star felt, Marco could time this perfectly. Turning what could have been terribly frustrating, into deliciously frustrating. He played the princess like a fiddle and, where she went, Jackie followed. Up and down, up and down. More and more flustered, louder and louder, more and more desperate for release.

Finally, after a long time of letting it all ebb and flow, rise and fall, Marco drove it all the way up and kept it there, until he felt the thighs around him tremble. The two most popular girls in school, the two girls he loved, came loudly in unison by his actions. He sat besides Star, and caressed her hair, as he looked smiling at Jackie, splayed on the chair. They were both panting, trying to recover their breath. Marco could have died then and it wouldn’t have mattered, he would have died a legend.

They rested for a while, Marco and Star cuddling in bed. Jackie smiling at them from her post, still seemingly determined to keep to her role as an onlooker, despite the added special effects.

After some time, Star and Marco began leisurely making out again. His hands running gently over her wings, hers tracing his chest and cupping his buttocks. He licked her breasts once more, causing her nipples to stand at attention. His finger found its way inside Star’s sex, carefully readying it for what they all knew was coming.

Delicious moments of anticipation passed, and then, he spoke, cockily, “Well, I think I am going to be fucking my two girlfriends now, if there is no objection.”

Star pouted, and seemed to think, “Nah, can’t think of one! Jackie?”
“Does that really count as fucking both of us, Marco? Or just Star?” the other girl asked, rolling her eyes playfully at him. “Not that I am complaining...”

----

There was a strange sensation about this all, a subtle wrongness amidst all the wonder and excitement. But, then again, a subtle wrongness was always part of some of the better kinds of sex, in some form or another. Star was young, but she knew at least that much.

Maybe it was just the effect of having Jackie watching, or the mewman herself not feeling entirely at ease with the ways they were testing the boundaries of the link. But, hey, dark magic wasn’t always a bad thing. That was one of the few positive lessons of the past few weeks. It was just magic you had to be a bit more careful with. Which, truth be told, she wasn’t being right now, not in the least. But, in her defense, there was a young strapping boy, all lean muscles from karate training, currently pinning her down to the bed by her wrists and about to take her wildly, while his other girlfriend watched the whole performance. In Star’s book, that excused great many lapses in magical caution.

She bit her lip. “Marco... I missed this,” she stated.

“Me too, Star,” he replied in a deep tone filled with want, and she felt him enter her again.

She looked into his eyes, and for a moment, nothing else existed. Not Sam and all of his hell. Not the creature that killed her mom. Not Janna. Not Tom. Not even Jackie, although Star would feel guilty to admit this later. She loved Marco. She wanted Marco. She needed Marco. He was the person that tied her to this world. She had come back to life, partly, because of him, and this... this was living.

She reached for him through the link, making sure she could savor each of his sensations, as well as her own. The place where she ended and her lover begun was a blurred one, in more ways than one.

She felt her heart racing, as the boy begun sliding in and out from her. He filled her marvelously, and slid easily in her arousal. She bit her lip to prevent herself from moaning just yet, and let out a soft satisfied whimper instead. She was in heaven, or very nearly so, lost in amidst a sea of pleasurable sensations. The color of that sea was a bright shade of green.

There was, in the corner of her awareness, a voice. A voice that hardly mattered as her consciousness drifted atop waves of pleasure, her own as well as Marco’s, as her body suffused with delicious heat. The voice was, strangely enough, Toffee’s.

“Hello, Star.”

She ignored him. She wanted nothing to do with the lizard. In the back of her mind, alarms were going off like crazy, but there was a wall between that and her dreamlike state of bliss.

“You know this won’t last, don’t you?” he spoke in a detached neutral tone. “It is just the calm before the storm. Before you lead them into pain and into darkness once again, until you, and them, break against horrors untold.” He paused, letting that part of her that could still feel fear consider his words. “You can change that. If you truly wish, if it is your full heart’s desire... then, you and I, we can make this last forever.”

This moment, this pleasure, this wicked storm of sensations, lasting forever... it would be the best thing Star could imagine. She knew, she knew deep inside her soul, that what the monster’s voice
was offering was wrong. But she still wanted it.

“Not just the moment, Star. Although that too, if you wish. I can make your love last forever. True love: always changing, yet eternal, like the sky,” he spoke. “You weren’t even supposed to be still alive, but you are. You have done enough. You have fought enough. It’s time for you to enjoy your happiness, for now and ever after.”

It wasn’t Toffee, Star realized. Not really. There was a wordless glowing pure truth behind the pretended voice. Something bright emerald and made of boundless hope. Something that wouldn’t, couldn’t, lie. The words spoken were only a part of the bargain it offered. In her mind, she understood its meaning completely. Sam was wrong, there were things that didn’t have to end, and if Star wished it, if she desired it with all her heart, then the three of them would be one of them. Their love would last forever, or long enough that it might as well be forever. She just had to give up... everything else.

What about her mom? Star thought. Or Sam’s threat? Echo Creek and Mewni?

“Yes,” admitted Toffee, “that will all be quite sad. But you’ll have Marco, and Jackie too. Nothing can take them from you, not if your only wish is to have them, not if you give yourself over to that wish. You will have pleasure, and happiness, and love.”

’Love’... the word, or the force behind it, dug up something inside Star’s mind. Something that had gone half-asleep, and that was now shrieking in terrified alarm. ‘Love’?… ‘Love, all-conquering’!

She opened her eyes to see Marco’s own lost look of bliss. It was not one of sexual pleasure, nor was it the human (and mewman) emotion of joy, of happiness. It was something else, something numinous in the worst possible way. The entire room seemed completely flooded with emerald light, and the walls themselves shifted and blurred under a headache-inducing distortion. She twisted her head around to glance at a Jackie. She found herself staring into the human girl’s empty glazed-out eyes. She seemed to look right through Star.

Then the princess noticed that she was much higher up than she should have been. It was not an out-of-body experience this time, as had been the case before with the link. She was literally hovering in mid air, with Marco just barely holding on to her, his body swinging around wildly like a rag doll, a vacant smiling look on his face. Her black and golden wings were half-extended, two extra sets of arms were in the process of growing from her torso. A mass of violet threads of energy extended out of her, merging with the viridescent magic that threatened to engulf them all. Whether her partially transforming body was welcoming or fighting the strange presence, she couldn’t really tell. If it was the later, she was losing, badly.

Star realized her mistake then.

There had been a connection, between that time at Saint Olga’s, between the way the All-Seeing Eye had misfired, and her mother’s death. She had seen Mewni that night. She had seen a thing flying high above the night sky, along with all of the images of Marco and Jackie, of her and Tom. She had realized this after the funeral too, which is why she had been prepared to use the All-Seeing Eye spell not just to find her mother’s killer, but to try to summon it to her. She knew, just as well, that the link, between Marco, Jackie, and her, was also tied to that spell. All three things connected back to each other, yet her mind had before refused, or perhaps it had been blocked, from making the connection, between that which touched the three of them, and the creature they had fought in Tom’s hell.

It wasn’t just dark magic used unwisely. It was much worse than that. It was an invitation.
The being that killed her mother couldn’t follow them inside Sam’s domain, she had been confident of that. But if the link tied to it too, then it could attack them through it, from outside Sam’s hell. It apparently had just been waiting for her to reach out through the connection, to pull harder and harder at the link between Marco and herself, to give it just this kind of opening. It was using it to do something to her, to all of them.

Well, it had no idea just who it was messing with! Star focused her mind on undoing the link, on tearing it apart, on severing her connection to the green phantasm. A few days ago that would have been impossible. But now, after coming back? Now it should be well within her powers.

She struck at the intruding presence! She heard Marco shout in pain. Jackie fell to the floor, shivering as if from a terrible cold. She could feel what they felt. She knew she was hurting them now.

“Is that truly your choice, Star?” Toffee’s disembodied voice remarked, coldly. “I doubt it.”

Star hated that voice now. How dare he! How dare he make her do this. How dare he force himself into their moment of love and pleasure and turn it against them. She lashed against the being, with all of her fury and hate. Her wings extended, all six arms popped out entirely out of her torso, a violet brightness drowned out the green light.

Marco and Jackie screamed in agony, and Star, terrified, stopped herself.

Her incomplete transformation was now running in reverse, leaving her more and more vulnerable to the emerald malevolence.

It was utter smugness, self-satisfaction made sound, that coalesced as the monster’s voice inside the princess head, “I see you understand your predicament, after all, Star. You can have their love on my terms... or their death on yours.”

----

One moment, Marco had felt on top of the world. Really, he was on top of Star but, at that time, it had been almost the same thing. He had been happy. Not the kind of happiness that involves calm and tranquility, but the kind that involves excitement, and want, and hungry desire. The one that he could only feel as he gripped Star’s body close, and drove in and out of it as if he wished for nothing more than to break the both of them, so that their pieces would end up joining together in an entirely new configuration.

The moment after, however, his mind had become like a fogged mirror, one in which he couldn’t even find himself. There was no Marco, and no Star, and definitely nothing and no one else. There was only blissful tranquility. Love.

Then there was transient anger. Then brief pain. Then bliss again.

There was happiness, the calm kind of happiness. Something whispered to him that he should be happy, told him that all was alright. Someone was making a very important decision. A decision that would change his life forever. But they loved him. They would make the right decision. There was no other choice for them. He would be happy. Their love would last forever.

Then there was sadness.

Sadness despite the voice. Sadness that wasn’t his. But, because it wasn’t his, he was forced to remember the boundary of his own self. He was forced to remember who he was. He was Marco. The sadness wasn’t from Marco. The sadness was from Star, and it was greater than sadness.
Star was despairing.

He opened his eyes in panic. He found himself face to face with a crying Star. All around them the room burned with emerald flames. Jackie stared at them vacantly.

“M-marco!” cried Star, her face twisted in horror. “A-are you ok? W-what have we done!? W-hat have I done? And... why are you glowing?”

The boy looked down at his hands, they glowed bright red. Actually, they reflected light. Not the green brightness that enveloped all of them now, but a fainter red light, a light that came from the window and seemed to touch only him. It was not the glow of the ever burning City of Dis. There was no flicker to it.

It was a red glow the color of blood, lazily flowing down from the sky.

“Marco, I... I...” the princess seemed in shock. Her body floating in mid air, partly transformed into her six-armed butterfly form, partly still displaying her usual appearance. He realized he was out of her, but still holding her tightly in a naked hug. “Marco, I did this! The link, the sensations. It is not love! It was never love...”

“Star, calm down,” he pleaded. “Just, relax. Tell me what’s happening. Tell me what I can do to help you.”

“I tricked you. I deceived you. I did something to you, to all of us,” she cried. “The only reason you ever said my name when you were with Jackie was the stupid link...”

“Star, what are you talking about...?” Marco asked, puzzled. Then he remembered. He remembered the night he said Star’s name as he made love to Jackie. Later he would learn that it had been the same night Star and Tom had first slept together, and that whatever magical connection they shared had made him see glimpses of that. “Star, that doesn’t matter! I know what happened that night, it doesn’t change how I feel about you! I thought we had already talked about that.”

The link. The connection. The All-Seeing Eye. The green flames. It was all starting to fit together in Marco’s head as well. He looked carefully at Star and saw that her cheekmarks were glowing emerald, a sickly green hue creeping all through her skin. He looked around. Jackie had the same tone. All was suffused in greenness except for him.

“You don’t get it Marco, you really really don’t,” Star cried. “It can make you love me now, for all time. Do you understand that? Do you get what that means? It will kill you if I say no, it will kill Jackie too. But if it can make our love last forever... then how do I know it wasn’t it that made you love me in the first place? That night, with the spell. It could have all been my doing...”

“Star, I don’t understand half of what you are saying, but...” the human boy held her tightly, trying in vain to keep her safe from the emerald glow. “…I loved you before that night, before you ever saw me and Jackie together, before you cast the spell. I hadn’t quite realized it then, but I did. Jackie saw it. Hell, even before Jackie... that night, when you went to the Blood Moon Ball with Tom, I was, well, I was jealous. It felt just like yesterday felt. I am not saying jealousy is good, and you can definitely love someone just as deeply without being jealous. Jackie taught me that. But, still, I don’t think I could have been as worried as I was about losing you that night... to harm... or to someone else... if I didn’t love you even back then!”

Wait! The Blood Moon Ball! That was it! He had been worried about Star, and he had crashed her date with Tom. Star had told him about what happened there, before Marco arrived. About Tom wanting something to happen during the dance, something about the moon, and their souls, and
some weird thing with fingers interlocking.

Something clicked in Marco’s mind, something that had needed him to remember how rituals worked, and how prophecies were made. He had needed to know that there was an old kind of magic, a magic of barter, of treaty, of compact; a magic that dealt with ancient powers and which could join two souls as one. With that, it all fell into place: what Tom had wanted to happen that night, and what had actually happened.

“Let me make something clear, Star: I loved you before that day too! I cared for you from almost the day I first met you. That love has grown since then, of course. I won’t say I felt the same for you then as I do now, but it was still there back then. It was definitely there before I went to the underworld to find you, that night of your date with Tom,” Marco explained. “But, aside from that, if this green shimmering crap wants to magically link us for all eternity, it better get in line... Because we are already joined that way!”

The red light flowing down from the window, the light of the Blood Moon, the moon of lovers, the moon that was 666.5 years too early in a sky that had never before seen any moon, passed through Marco’s body and into Star’s. A cocoon of bright crimson light surrounded them, and it broke through the emerald brightness that had been gripping Star. She let a startled gasp, and looked at Marco in confusion. Her earlier distress was mostly gone. She almost begun to smile, until she saw his own frown.

It wasn’t over yet. There was still one big problem and, this time, the same solution wasn’t going to work. Or was it?

Marco turned around to look at Jackie, still collapsed at the feet of her chair. The green light seemed to all flow towards her now. She seemed to be in pain, clutching at her chest and trembling. She opened her eyes to see Marco and Star embracing in mid air, then doubled down in agony as green flames sprouted all around her. “Marco!”

Dragging Star by the hand, he swam in mid air towards her. It was as if the light of the Blood Moon was canceling not only the malignant presence of the green brightness, but also gravity itself. “Jackie, hold on!”

He offered his hand. Jackie grabbed it. Nothing happened. The red light still surrounded him and Star, while the green one covered a shivering Jackie.


Marco hugged Jackie, and Star did the same. The two naked teens held their friend, their girlfriend, close to them. He could feel what Star felt once more, and he knew they both wanted to protect her, to have her be safe. They both loved Jackie. Sure, perhaps not both in the same way, but they both did, with all their hearts. Marco realized that, as much as he loved Star, as much as it was true he had always loved Star, he loved Jackie just as much.

“Look, Blood Moon or whatever it is you want me to call you, I don’t know how any of this works. I don’t know if it is even possible...” he muttered under his breath. “But if there is any price I can pay, any bargain I can enter in, any ancient ritual or promise I can speak, that will save them both, then please... please let it be so,” he begged.

“I know it is way too greedy. So, if you need to take my life or whatever to balance this out, then, by all means, go ahead. But, please, let Jackie and Star both be alright... please...” he cried.

“...Please...”
It was not a ritual, or a spell, or an incantation. It was a prayer.

----

Jackie had already been somewhat uneasy when Marco and Star begun fucking. Well, alright, they had been fucking for a while, depending what you did or didn’t count as fucking. But, she meant, like, the last part, the penetration part, ‘fucking proper’ so to speak. It was not something she had ever before expected to see. She didn’t know if she would feel bad seeing it, or left out, or whatever. For the most part, it had been kind of intense but, mostly, cool to see. It was obvious that Star and Marco really loved, and desired, one another, and that was not a bad thing.

Not, that is, until the green light begun seeping out through the floor and ceiling, and the walls around them. At first, Jackie just felt really out of it. She felt Star’s and Marco’s sensations, but also a creepy feeling of unnatural calm that seemed to come from someone or something else. Then, pain, excruciating pain, being-tossed-like-a-rag-doll-by-Sam levels of pain.

She had seen Marco and Star embrace, become surrounded by a warm red glow as she shivered with cold. The emerald flames around her seemed not to burn her, but to freeze her. She was certain, that very second, that she had her answer: Marco loved Star, and he was discarding her instead. They were both leaving Jackie to die. That’s what the green cold thing whispered to her.

“Marco!” she cried out for help. Then she was forced to shut her eyes as she doubled down in pain. Her own feelings became twisted and turned inside out. Seeing the other two teens had been fun, and naughty, and cute, and hot, if only a bit nerve-wracking. Now it felt like a betrayal. She had pushed them together and they had left her behind, thrown her away as soon as she was no longer needed. She was not even the nice-to-have to Marco anymore, she was the spare piece, the one that didn’t fit.

Wait, what? That made no fucking sense! It was obvious to anyone with just the bare minimum powers of observation that that was not what was going on at all. Marco had said it, just a few hours ago: he had never wanted to leave her on Earth, which had been most of her basis for her whole ‘he likes Star better’ case. He simply had not wanted to pressure her into putting herself in danger. But he still needed her there. And, the two of them fucking? She had asked for that! And they had gone out of their way to make her feel included! That was true even if making her feel included involved what she now suspected could be fairly termed ‘the dark arts’. Something was messing with her head and, frankly, after Sam and his costumes, Jackie was starting to get real tired of people messing with her head.

She opened her eyes a second time, and realized that Star and Marco were both holding on to her, crying, and Marco was muttering something under his breath. She looked up at them, at the red light floating down on them, and smiled. They did care about her. Marco loved her. Star loved her. And Jackie loved them both back.

Somehow, when she looked down, she was glowing red too. Slowly, the green flames, the emerald shimmer, begun fading, leaving the room untouched, and them unharmed.

She hugged Star and Marco, and kissed one or both of them. Later, she couldn’t recall which was it, exactly.

----

“Ok, so, any of you care to explain what just happened?” Jackie asked finally.
They had been laying on the floor, even after the red light had stopped shining through the window, huddled up together for what had felt like hours. It probably hadn’t been that long, not even close, but it had felt, well, eternal. Either way, it was still too much to process.

“I... I almost got us all killed,” spoke Star in a soft apologetic tone, “again.”

“Oh.”

“And, well,” Marco continued. The predominant texture of his voice was one of uncertainty, but it was far from the only emotion it carried. “I believe we all got our souls bound together in an ancient love ritual. But that’s probably mostly a good thing. I think...?”

“Oh.”

Jackie blinked. Then she realized that her back hurt.

“Well, could we at least get up from the floor and into the bed?”

She noted that all three of them blushed right as she said that. She hadn’t meant it that way! Had she?

----

It took Marco and Star a while to agree entirely on an interpretation of what had just happened, while Jackie mostly listened at them, dumbfounded. After they were done, she tried her best to summarize their version, “So, essentially, that spell Star cast back then, the link thing, it also links us, or linked us, to the green flame monster from hell from the other day?”

“Yeah,” Star answered, uncertainly, “I think so.”

The princess frowned, as if she knew there was something there that didn’t quite fit. Jackie considered asking about how this tied to what had happened to her mom, but thought better of it. The mewman felt guilty enough about that as it was. Jackie hoped there was a less disturbing explanation there than any of the ones that suggested themselves to her in the back of her mind; one in which Star’s spell had not, somehow, led to Moon’s death. It just didn’t seem fair!

“Ok, and it tried to attack us, through that link.” the human girl continued. “But, somehow Marco remembered that the two of your have yet another magical bond, that you got before that one... which, by the way, Marco Díaz, is the kind of thing you generally should disclose to a girl before accepting to be her boyfriend!”

She gave him a playful punch in the arm. Whatever it took to get their thoughts away from the darkest aspects of their situation. At least, for now.

“Ouch,” he complained, reflexively. “I mean, I didn’t understand that at the time! It’s only in retrospect that it clicked together, Jackie.”

“Also,” Star added, helpfully, “I think you are also magically bonded to Marco now, or, maybe, to both of us?”

She looked at Marco, who shrugged.

“Again,” Jackie rolled her eyes, “that’s the kind of thing I might have wanted to have had a say in, honestly.”
“Sorry, Jackie!” the boy apologized. “I panicked. I couldn’t think of what else to do...”

She liked Marco, like really really liked him, and this whole Blood Moon thing had been yet another thing that Marco and Star had between the two of them, to which Jackie was initially an outsider. If she had learned about it before what had just happened, she perhaps might have wished to have something like that with him too. But, still, it was the principle of the thing, if nothing else. Involuntary soul bondage was the kind of stuff that she felt one ought to be opposed to as a general rule. Not that she could really be angry at Marco, of course. After all, he had probably saved her life.

“How about Star’s wand?” the skateboarder girl pointed out. She felt a bit ungrateful, but she had to ask.

“Jackie, I tried to fight it with magic,” Star explained. “It was using you as hostages, though. I think I could have beat it, maybe, but not without seriously hurting both of you. I was ready to give up before Marco intervened,” she admitted. “Also, I guess neither of us got a choice back then either. This is actually my first time learning about any sort of soul bond... Although, I guess that demon priest did sort of hint at it... with the whole ‘Mhmmm’ thing.” As she said that, Star did a weird gesture where she brought both hands together in front of her, slowly interlocking her fingers. “Back then I thought he was talking about sex and just thought we didn’t know about it or something!”

“And it doesn’t bother you? The soul bond thing?” Jackie raised an eyebrow. “Either of you?”

“Well, Jackie...” Star said thoughtfully. “Like, don’t tell Tom or anything, he really is a great guy, but, I am mostly relieved it was Marco and not him...”

“I...” Marco stammered. “I am sorry if I forced this on you two, both of you. I don’t think the bond means we need to be together if you two don’t want, or anything. I guess I personally don’t regret it on my end. But, well, I would regret it if you two regret it. Does that make sense?”

Jackie smiled. Ok, *fine*, there were far worse people to be magically entangled with than those two. She relaxed.

Then, turning to face Marco, she smirked at him.

“‘Don’t regret it’? Just that? Marco, you somehow claimed two innocent girls’ souls as your own and are, I am sure, quite proud of it!” After witnessing him and Star, and sensing Marco’s emotions through the link, Jackie knew his feelings far too well to let him feign innocence on that count. “Remind me, between you and Tom, who was the demon again?”

“I didn’t...” Marco blushed, uneasy.

“You fiend!” exclaimed Star dramatically, interrupting the boy. She brought both hands to her naked chest and pretended to faint, before dissolving in a fit of giggles. “You tricked us!”

“I... I am sorr... wait, what?” he exclaimed.

Jackie just rolled herself atop him and kissed him, pressing against his naked torso. It seemed like the thing to do. “Well, Marco, what are you going to do with the two maidens whose fate you have chained to yours?”

He looked up surprised, if only for a second. Then he got the idea and begun pulling loose the strings of the crappy potato sack that was the damn slave costume. Once he got it down to her waist, he began leisurely roaming his hands over her naked breasts. “I think I have an idea or two
about that...” he confessed. She bit her lip and enjoyed the tingle of anticipation, losing herself in his eyes until...

“Whoa, Marco, look at the size of those two!” exclaimed Star suddenly, in mock surprise. It was only then that Jackie remembered the mewman was there with them, and she was staring at the human girl’s breasts. She was, also, rather crudely mirroring the position of Marco’s hands in the air, well ahead of her own chest. Jackie blushed.

“Ah, I guess I should have asked you if this was ok, Star. Especially after what just...” the human girl trailed off, as the princess crawled around her in the bed, and then begun pulling down the slave costume fully away from her. “Star? What are you doing?”

The mewman’s naked body drew closer to her. She whispered cheerfully into Jackie’s ear, “getting you ready for Marco to fuck the here out of you.”

‘Well, yeah,’ Jackie thought, ‘this is happening’. Not that anyone had failed to see it coming.

Star and Marco kissed each other as he played with Jackie’s boobs. Soon after, he flipped her around, the princess’ body rotating along Jackie’s own. They ended up with her laying on Star’s lap, with Marco on top on the opposite side. The mewman held both of the human girl’s arms up above her head and down towards the bed, as the boy teased her breasts with his tongue. Jackie closed her eyes and let herself dissolve into the delicious minutes that followed.

“So, Marco, what’s your favorite, melons or strawberries?” asked the princess at one point.

The boy had the common sense of giving an unintelligible muffled response to that. Jackie proudly puffed her chest forward, drawing a chuckle from the girl behind her. Hey, if Star was going to keep bringing that up, she was happy to raise to the bait.

Moments later, they all shuffled again, this time having Marco sit down as Star and Jackie briefly made a show of both giving him a blowjob, licking up and down the shaft on either side, taking turns to take his cock into each of their mouths. The girl didn’t need any magical link to tell her that they were fulfilling one of the teenage boy’s dearest and most unbearably cliche fantasies with that act. She was only too happy to oblige, and so, apparently, was Star.

Next, it was Marco’s turn to go down on Jackie. He begun slowly, methodically, like he always did, but picked up the pace quickly. Between the memories of what she had just seen earlier, and the novelty factor of the extra person situation, the human girl did not need much of a warm-up before she was panting breathlessly from Marco’s attentions. It didn’t help that the other girl kept playing with the boy’s hair as she stared at his head between Jackie’s legs.

“Looks like he really thinks you are tasty,” the princess commented, mock innocently. She kissed Marco on the forehead softly. Meanwhile, Marco’s tongue avidly explored Jackie’s cunt, driving her wild. Fuck it, Star, that stuff just wasn’t fair!

Jackie actually pulled the princess up into a kiss in her excitement, partly to thank her for being such an amazing sport, partly because, damn it, if they were breaking all the taboos tonight, then she wanted to get this one out of the way too. She concluded that, overall, Marco was still more of her thing, but she had to admit Star’s lips were a lot softer than the boy’s.

Marco’s lips, by the way, were very gently sucking on her clit. In a way, it reminded her of the telepathically shared blowjob experience, and that thought, combined with the rather more intense sensation, almost made Jackie come right there.
Star retrieved a pink condom from god knows where, and put it on Marco. Jackie was so far out of it at the time that, even later, she would never be able to recall how the mewman pulled that off. It was weird, though, since the princess hadn’t used one before. Then, Jackie realized, as Star got out of the way and lied on the far side of the bed, that this was for her own benefit. She glanced at Star, then at Marco, and blushed.

“So, Marco, two girls in one night,” Star beamed, “Up to the challenge, my wild man?”

The boy smiled. Jackie motioned for him to come closer and opened her legs invitingly. Soon, he was atop her, and she felt him align against her entrance. Then, slowly, he plunged deep inside of her.

“So, Marco, I never got to ask over the spell the other time: How does it feel to be fucking your longtime crush?” Star asked. She was really getting into this. “We sure have come a long way from a nod, I think! Remind me, what step of your plan was this? Twenty-three? Twenty-two?”

Wait, Star knew about the nod thing? Ah, of course she knew! Marco must have told her about his feelings for Jackie before he told Jackie herself!

“Come on Marco, harder! Harder! Make her beg for mercy!” cheered on Star. Not that Jackie minded when the boy did, in fact, listen to the mewman, and picked up a rather athletic pace. “You are fucking Jackie, remember? You know, the girl of your dreams? How many times did you jerk off thinking of this, Marco? Now she is all yours. Fuck her like you mean it! Fuck Jackie. Lynn. Thomas!”

‘Yeah, Star, say my name’, thought Jackie with a chuckle. Seriously, what had gotten into princess potty mouth over there?

Either way, right now, Jackie was more interested in what was getting into her. She was starting to lose track of the very flow of time, quickly approaching an explosive climax that was only made the most powerful by the events before now, and by Star’s enthusiastic - if somewhat aggressive - encouragement.

The mewman princess licked one of her fingers slowly, and moved to hug Marco from behind. Giving Jackie and impish look, she stuck her hand between the boy’s buttocks and whispered something in his ear.

Jackie felt Marco’s cock throb inside her as he came. An instant later, she was right there with him, trembling once more, but this time in satisfied ecstasy.

After that, she vaguely recalled Marco going to the bathroom, and all three of them hugging and kissing, and then falling asleep together in some amorphous three way cuddle-orgy. Jackie concluded that, as far as first time threesome experiences went, this hadn’t been half bad, even if you accounted for being interrupted by a fiery cosmic horror half-way through. If you didn’t count that part, it had been fucking amazing!

Right then, in that brief moment, it truly seemed like things might just end up being alright.

Chapter End Notes

Now, this one was the threesome chapter, and the last bit of smut we will get for a
good long while.

**Coming up next:** *Chapter 29 Victory March*
Chapter Summary

In which awkward moments are had, a speech is made, our heroes fly out of hell, and there is a murder of crows.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning, this is a long chapter. Almost certainly the longest in Part III.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 30: Victory March

Ten-thousand Steps Mountain got its name from the many irregular footholds forming the narrow staircase chiseled along its steep western face. The Kneeling Gardener got its name, instead, from its shape - a curved pinnacle of bare rock resembling a crouching giant - and from the beautiful lush meadows it overlooked to the south. Night Peak Mountain got its name from the black barren stone that adorned its tall cliff. Crow Temple Mountain got its name from the abandoned shrine at the top, and the monster that inhabited it.

They were all one and the same.

Every month, the day before the full moon, two or three young men and women from the village below, bravely and voluntarily, would go up the mountain. One or two would come back down the next day. The remaining one would stay there, as an offering to the beast. Those not kept never spoke of what happened up there, other than to report that their companion had died, and to describe the fearsome form of the crow.

It was recalled by the eldest among the villagers in Xoth’kaul that, one time, many years ago, the volunteer offerings failed to arrive to the top, and so too failed the spares to return. Perhaps, gripped by a sudden bout of cowardice, they made a pact to flee the valley together. Perhaps they fell to their deaths while trying to climb the treacherous steps. Be as it might, the crow descended upon the village the next night, the night after the full moon. It passed unseen among houses and pathways, leaving no living witness. Instead, in its wake, it left dead men and frozen trees, and a trail of huge black feathers, as if to forestall any doubt of its involvement or of its displeasure. Since then, the village as a whole had not dared let a month pass without a suitable sacrifice to the crow.

Xoth’kaul always sent its young, rather than its elderly. While many old men and women in the village would have been happy to offer themselves in order to spare those who still had a longer life ahead of them, the difficulty of the journey made that selfless act impractical. Instead, the village settled on a traditional rite of passage: ‘Go to the crow before becoming an adult, before you have wives or husbands to miss you, or children to be made orphans. Go to the crow in groups, instead of alone, so there is always a chance of being spared. Should the beast turn you down, then
you need never again make the climb, your duty forever fulfilled’.

Marco had no children, and he had no one left that would miss him. Nachos, perhaps, but she would be alright. Hekapoo would probably just shrug, make some remark about how he lasted longer than she expected, note how absolutely stupid it was that it was the crow, of all things, who got him, and call it a decade. Truth be told, Marco was not part of Xoth’kaul, or its compulsory death pact. He was a stranger in these lands and had stayed only one night in the forest village. He had learned about the crow only yesterday, a tale told to him by one of the village elders in exchange for a tale of his own. He had no reason to make the climb, no reason to involve himself at all with a situation that everyone else down there regarded as a sad but necessary fact of life. They had not asked for his help.

“So, why are we doing this, then, you dumbass?” spoke his companion aloud, replying to his thoughts. They sat in front of the creepy oaken sanctuary atop Ten-thousand Steps Mountain, waiting for dusk.

The cursed monster arm knew the answer, and not just because it could read Marco’s mind. They had this same conversation often enough. It was a way to pass the time, as much as it was anything else.

Was talking to yourself still crazy if there really were two people inside you? What if, strictly speaking, you didn’t need to talk aloud to hear one another, but did it anyways?

“Because, that is what we do, Kar. We wander from town to town and country to country, we ask for stories, hoping it is something relevant to wherever the hell Hekapoo is hiding. When it inevitably turns out to be an unrelated bit about their local man-eating monster, we seek it out, and we kill it for them,” he shrugged. “Because we are fucking heroes, or something.”

“Because we have a death wish, more likely,” replied the mouth on his arm, with a toothy grin.

“It’s the same damn thing,” Marco shot back, bitterly.

“Well, I for one am glad to see my optimism is rubbing off on you,” Kar retorted. “Speaking of which: Did you notice it is not a full moon tonight, idiot? What if the fucking bird doesn’t show up? We wait up here for a week?”

Fortunately, Marco never did have to answer that question. A strong wind blew around them that very moment, and the temperature seemed to drop a full ten degrees. The temple had no doors or walls, only a rooftop supported by four pillars covering a plain wooden floor. There had been nothing on that floor an instant ago. Now, it was covered in black feathers. They peeled off from the oak panels on the ground, shadows gaining volume and shape of their own. They floated around in a whirlwind, blocking Marco’s sight.

He sprung up, and set himself in a ready stance, but did not attack, not until he knew what he was facing.

When the freezing wind stopped blowing, he saw himself face to face with the crow. It was huge. Twice as tall as the warrior himself, and its wings were even longer. It looked at Marco quizzically. The former guildmaster noticed he could see through the creature’s body. A ghost, or a spirit. Great.

“It is not time yet, and you are not one of the children. Why then have you come?” heard Marco, although the bird’s beak remained closed.
“I am Marco of Zonst, Marco of Averx, Marco of K’Ahleh,” he introduced himself. “I am here to end your murderous ways!”

“Murder? My brethren are as numerous as the stars, but my killings only one per moon,” the spirit answered. “I take only as many as are needed, as the children and I agreed long ago. It is their deal to make or end, not yours, and it is entirely by their choice that I nest on this peak.”

“That’s not what we heard,” remarked Kar.

But Marco was already moving past the point of debate. He brought both hands forward, repeated a few ancient words and begun the motions of a ritual he seldom got to use. As the magic clicked into place, the creature’s body seemed to become bright with a restless light and the world around them turned grayer and duller by comparison. Marco could see the crow’s essence flowing slowly all through the shape of the being, in strange unearthly colors: a bright shade of black, a freezing crimson red, a purple beyond any purple found in the world of the living. It was obviously a spirit. It was too large and too alien to be a ghost.

The warrior pushed his two closed fists forward and held them in front of him. Without touching the crow, he forced its wings to spread open as far as he could. It cawed as Marco pinned it there, in mid air, his own will opposing that of the dark spirit. He didn’t need to touch it. Physical space was irrelevant to the ritual. It was mind and soul that fought the creature, not body. The movements, however, guided the brain through the required states. Muscle memory supplemented pure concentration. Thought followed action. The gestures constituted a forming exercise, an aid, an external kata to focus his inner strength.

All around him, the small plateau around the temple became bright, lit up by hundreds of small shimmering spheres of white light. Most were the size of ping pong balls, a few slightly bigger, up to the size of a large orange. Having used the Exorcism Ritual before, Marco knew them for what they were: souls. Mortal souls, all trapped here by the crow, bound to the mountain, held from their next journey.

The warrior frowned with anger and determination.

If there was something Allion had hammered into him when she taught him the Exorcism Ritual, and something that he had seen again and again as he used the ritual to chase possessing ghosts out of places and people, was the pain that a soul experienced when it wasn’t allowed to move on. A soul weighted with regret often stayed on this world, it clung to it until it became a ghost, mad with grief and pain. It was a fate worse than death. The Exorcism Ritual allowed one to free those afflicted with such unbearable condition, to take upon that same weight into your own soul, while allowing the one forming the ghost to finally move beyond. It was a great mercy, with a heavy cost due only at the day of your own death.

The worst part, however, was that none of these souls around him now seemed particularly heavy. They all looked like the kind of soul that should have moved on, that would have floated away on their own lightness. These weren’t angry ghosts. These were innocent people held back from reincarnation by whatever kind of hellish being the crow was. Marco let his rage turn towards the bird.

The Exorcism Ritual wasn’t only used to dispel ghosts. It could be used to interact with anything and everything immaterial, such as, say, a spirit. Your determination replaced your physical force, your ingenuity became your reach, your sense of self was your armor. Taking a deep breath, Marco punched at the crow’s chest with his mind, just as he pushed his outstretched fist in its direction, albeit at a distance. He clawed at the spirit’s center, pressing into it and burying a quality of sharpness until he cut through its non-material substance, splattering his own soul with the black
phantasmal ichor of psychic butchery. A karmic evil, yet, clearly, the lesser one.

The crow’s bright unearthly colors faded to black, even under the sight given by the ritual. It exploded into a snowfall of coal-black feathers.

Instantly, Marco heard a hundred sobbing cries all around him. They were not the joyful cries of the liberated. They were the sorrowful cries of those left orphan. They were the accusing cries of those who witnessed a terrible crime. The souls around him bloated into the size of ox heads, and became gray with heavy regret.

“You didn’t listen...” spoke a young man’s voice.

“... we were the gardeners... the crow was our teacher... our patron...” added another.

“Didn’t know... couldn’t know...” corrected a young woman.

“Doesn’t matter. Our children and grandchildren will pay the price,” retorted another.

“So will he... His soul is heavy as the mountain,” a woman.

“Not just for this act alone,” a man.

Marco looked horrified through the cliff, as the light of the waxing moon illuminated the forest below. Once vibrantly green and flush with life, it was quickly drying. It was as if fall and winter both advanced upon it in the span of a few minutes. Marco knew, he knew, that spring would never again come to the Kneeling Gardener’s valley. That was the deal the crow had tried to explain, he realized, the other end of the bargain: an abundance and warmth purchased in blood.

“His soul is heavy with destiny, and with love.”

“It will sink.”

“We must pity him.”

“We must pity us.”

“Never pity the dead, but the living. We must pity our children, and grandchildren, and the children of their lines. The crow took us one per moon, but now hunger will take them all...”

Marco woke up startled, heart still racing from the memory of the dream, or, perhaps, the dream of a terrible memory. He slowly realized where he was: back in Star’s room. The princess and Jackie were both asleep next to him, the mewman’s foot somehow on his face. Only then did he begin to calm down.

----

Sam’s accursed ballroom was the last place any of them wished to revisit. Star more so than any of her friends. After all, she had actually died in here. There was a certain nasty aftertaste whenever you went back to any place in which you had previously suffocated to death, never mind the fact that she had apparently also been burned to ashes shortly thereafter.

Sure, it had all turned out well enough in the end, but, still, just standing once more in this room gave her all the creeps!

And yet, it was one of the few places inside the damned castle - literally damned, Star supposed - that they all knew how to find. It was either meeting here or back in her own room. Between those
two, the princess felt more mortified hosting Tom and Janna back in her assigned chambers than she felt spooked inside the huge marble-tiled ballroom. Look, dying was awkward too, but how was she supposed to deliver any sort of serious speech while sitting in the bed she had just had a threeway in?!

“Hey, Star, Marco, Jackie!” Tom greeted them as he walked into the room through one of the side staircases. He was forcing a smile, badly. “Friends, buddies, pals! Did you all sleep well last night? Ah, I mean, not that is any of my business how any of you slept... No, wait! That sounded wrong... I am just asking if you are rested, that’s all... Of course, if you didn’t rest that’s fine too, I just...”

“Tom!” Star interrupted him, blushing a deep shade of red. His rambling was only making things worse.

“Ah, sorry, Star,” he apologized, then seemed to calm down. “I’ll... I’ll just shut up now.”

Jackie walked towards the demon prince with an unreadable expression in her face. She was back in her white and green t-shirt and shorts. The nacre scabbard to her left, and the belt that supported it, were the only changes from her usual Echo Creek outfit.

They were all back to their normal clothes, actually, all three of them. Star had conjured those this morning, rather than have them all go back into Sam’s cursed costumes. So far, they had not heard any complaints from the devil about that; nor anything else from him, for that matter. Not that Star herself minded not seeing Sam’s smug face ever again.

The mewman supposed she should do the same for Tom, who was, after all, still wearing the scoundrel outfit. But, before she could even offer, Jackie stopped right in front of him. She raised a hand as if she were about to slap him, and then, well, she just held it there.

Tom looked dumbfounded at the human girl.

“Hey, dude, don’t leave me hanging,” she spoke. “High five!”

Tom blinked. Then, tentatively, he returned the gesture, softly clapping his own hand against the girl’s raised palm, “Ok, sure, high five... but, um, why?”

“Well, we have both been in bed with Star,” Jackie winked at the demon, and at the mewman herself. “Figured you might want to welcome me to the club!”

“Jackie!!” Star shouted, annoyed.

She wasn’t ashamed of last night or anything. But, maybe, she was still a bit self-conscious. It just wasn’t the way she had expected this meeting to start, ok? Besides, what Jackie just said could easily be taken to imply a lot more than what had actually happened!

Star turned towards the demon prince, and reflexively tried to explain: “It’s actually not like that! I mean Jackie and I,” It wasn’t. Was it? Well, it sort of was, and it sort of wasn’t. “… look, we were both with Marco, just, well, at the same time, and...”

The demon looked from the human girl to her, visibly shocked. Star realized she was just putting her own foot in her mouth by clarifying anything about last night to her ex. After all, he had had a crush on her up until at least two days ago, never mind that it was he who first said they shouldn’t see each other. And he wasn’t like the human girl, right? Tom was pretty jealous, actually. So, what was Jackie thinking, bringing that stuff up? And what was Start herself blabbering about?!

Still, the princess felt the impulse to ramble on, out of sheer nervousness. She had to literally bring
down both hands in front of her big mouth to stop herself from saying anything else. Tom just stared at her, amused. He eventually broke out into a nervous chuckle. Jackie grinned at this.

“Way too much information, the both of you!” declared the boy, in mock reproach. However, he seemed a lot more relaxed than before. The smile he wore now was the genuine article.

“Fair enough, dude,” Jackie jumped back into the conversation with an easy shrug. “Sorry that I went ahead and made it awkward. I just thought it might actually be better to dive right into the deep end of the awkward pool, rather than to dip our toes into it all day long…”

Tom rubbed the back of his head distractedly as he seemed to think it through. “Yeah, right, um, I see your point.”

“But, in all seriousness, are you doing alright?” asked Jackie. “You are not like, secretly still pining after Star or anything like that, right? Because, trust me, either way, it is usually better to just be honest with this sort of stuff.” As she spoke, her eyes shifted ever so slightly to her right in a nervous glance.

“What? No! Nothing like that!” Tom replied. He turned back towards the mewman. “I swear. Really! Look, obviously I care about you, Star, a lot, and that hasn’t changed. But, I meant what I said last night. It’s just, well, it is a bit awkward, you know? Being the third... err... fourth wheel...? Also, that is one idiom that just doesn’t work in this sort of situation.”

“Awww, Tom!” spoke the princess. “Sorry if we all left you alone last night. After all that happened, I don’t think I would have liked to spend the night alone in this super creepy castle...” Star realized, perhaps a bit too late. Her smile turned into a small frown. “Wow. That kinda stunk on our part, actually. Sorry.”

“Heh, Star. Don’t sweat it. I am a demon, a prince of the underworld, remember?” Tom gave her his patented ‘trying to look cool’ grin. “This is downright cozy for me! It takes quite a lot spook me-eeeeehh...!”

Tom jumped up as one of the huge balcony windows opened behind him, swinging inwards violently with a thunderclap. A long shadow flowed unctuously into the terrace from somewhere up in the roof of the castle. The substance was at once a dense oily liquid and a volumeless absence of light. It dripped down the huge stone archway that supported the window frame, and coalesced into a pool of black ichor that looked dark enough to be a hole in the stone itself. The puddle of inky blackness caught fire then, and, from the midst of the blue flames, a cowled figure emerged.

“Ok, are we leaving or what?” asked the witch, impatiently, as she smothered the last of the blue embers with her foot.

“Well, we were actually waiting for you, Janna,” replied Star, unfazed by the troublemaker girl’s dramatic entrance. She took a deep breath and turned serious for a moment. “Look, people, now that we are all here, this part is important, alright? I am just going to say this one last time: none of you have to come with me!”

Marco was the first to open his mouth to protest. But the princess raised her hand, and they all felt silent in response. It helped that her expression really did mean business now. It helped that her hand was holding the magic wand. It helped that the crystal in the middle of the wand had once again melted into a very realistically star-like ball of golden fire, spinning inside the scepter’s head. Apparently, it could do that.

“I mean it!” Star admonished. “You can all still go back. I think I can give you a way to go back. I
know you all want to say no, either because you want to help me, or because you want to protect those at home that would be hurt if I fail... Oh, right! Tom, Janna, I didn’t tell you yet! Well, the short of it is that Sam will destroy Earth and Mewni, and the local underworld, and a bunch of other places, if I don’t kill the thing that killed my mother...” Star frowned. Clearly she was fumbling this speech of hers. Maybe she ought to have practiced it.

“The point is: he is forcing me to do it, not you,” she continued, nonetheless. “Chances are that, if you do go with me, you are risking your life. And, even in the cases where we win, where I win, you could get hurt, you could die. In the last twenty-four hours, you all came close to dying, some of you two or three times, and it has all been, at least in part, because of me. I don’t want to... no, rather, I can’t... keep putting you at risk like that.”

She sighed, anticipating their objections.

“I know I can’t force you not to come with me, and won’t turn away your help, nor will I close off from you, if you insist on helping. I won’t even say I don’t appreciate it,” she admitted. “But, please, think of your friends, think of your families, think how they would feel if you don’t come back... let’s all do the thing none of us has been any good at doing so far, and think carefully about the risks we are taking... If you are sure, then I promise I won’t ask again. But, please, really think about it.”

They stayed silent for a few seconds.

“Done thinking,” Marco spoke first. “And, well, no fucking way, Star! I am not leaving you to face this alone, no matter what happens.”

“Ditto,” spoke Jackie. “Look, you ask us to think about our families. Well, we are! Again, if you fail because we weren’t there, then our parents and friends will die too. And, well,” she took the glass sword out of the scabbard, “I didn’t just get this thing to hang it on a wall back home. Say what you will about Sam, but I think he already knows exactly where we are going to need it... where you are going to need me.”

“And, on that unassailable bit of logic,” Tom spoke, “I am in too. For you, Star, as a friend. But also for my parents too. Besides, I am way tougher to kill than any of you. It’s not even like I am taking the same risks you three are. I’ll be fine.”

Janna stood there, silent.

As all eyes turned towards her, she said, smiling, “Oh, me? I am only tagging along until we get out of this place. I don’t want to stay here, and I don’t want to go back home anymore either, particularly if you four fucking up means there won’t be a home to go back to anyways! So, I guess I am with you all until we hit the next dimension. After that, I am going my own way. I am done...” she looked at Star, then at Tom, “... with all of you.”

----

Star kept her word about respecting their choice in the matter, once she was convinced they had all thought things through. Marco was relieved. Either way he was going to follow Star to the ends of the multiverse if needed be, but he’d much rather not have to keep making the same case over and over again. They all knew the risks, but that was only the more reason as to why there was just no way he would abandon Star to face them alone. He would be there for her, no matter what, and he knew she would do the same for him.

In a way, last night was emblematic of that fact. Star had rescued them all from Sam. Then, later,
when the green weirdness had gone after them, it had been Marco’s quick thinking about the Blood Moon Ball that had freed them! Well, actually, they might not have been in danger then if not for the link between them, so that meant that Star would never have been in trouble if Marco hadn’t been there in the first place... Ok, fine, maybe it was a bad example. Still, he wanted to be there to help Star, and there was nothing she could say or do that would change his mind about that.

All five of them now soared through the sky above the labyrinthine stone bridges and rivers of fire of Sam’s domain. To their relief, the devil himself hadn’t shown up to stop them, or to ‘say goodbye’, or to screw with them further in any way. Star, Jackie, Tom, and Marco, all rode atop the spookiest pack of flying unicorns he had ever seen.

Having lived with Star for a year, he had no small experience with scary-looking unicorns. He was becoming somewhat of an expert on those, really. Yet these were something else entirely.

They were a cross between the undead horse that had pulled Tom’s carriage and the ones that got summoned by Star’s Warnicorn Stampede. They were not really skeletons, but they were almost thin enough to be. Each horse was covered in leathery black skin, clinging close to muscular legs and gaunt bodies, the rib cage visible through the emaciated flesh. The head was downright cadaveric, filled with scars and crowned by a long sharp horn, which looked as if made of forged iron. From their flanks sprouted long dragon-like wings. Despite their famished shape, they all had an unearthly air of terrifying strength about them as they glided through the sky. Each horse was clad in black steel armor. Their eyes glowed with violet fire.

Back at Sam’s castle, Star had conjured everyone a hefty breakfast, which they happily ate. Not long after that, she had lifted her wand and the golden sun inside of it had turned into a sphere of purple fire as she muttered some long incantation that he couldn’t quite follow. Out of nowhere, five of the monstrous horses had appeared before them. Marco still remembered the gelid breath of the shadowy beast on his face, and wondered if the thing was even warm-blooded.

Star had just jumped atop her own horse with a cheerful cry of “Yay, horsie!” and a disquieting glee in her eyes. Despite the creepiness of it, it made Marco almost nostalgic.

Eventually, they each had mounted one, some more reluctantly than others. All, that is, except Janna.

Instead of accepting Star’s spell as her ride, Janna had taken a step back from it, placed her left hand atop her own heart, and let out a horrifying howl. They all heard the sound of cracking bones and twisting flesh, and then the ripping of fabric as two huge bat-like wings emerged from behind the witch’s cloak. They were the exact same color of Janna’s own skin, and smeared with small patches of dried blood. After seeing that, Star’s flying horses didn’t seem that spooky anymore.

Marco tugged on the reigns of his ride, and guided it gently closer to where Jackie was flying. Frankly, it was no Nachos, but he was slowly getting used to the Hell Pegasus or whatever it was.

“Oh, Diaz!” she greeted him with a wave, gently guiding her own mount with the remaining hand. “Is riding a flying horse the coolest or what?”

“It’s pretty neat, I suppose,” he said noncommittally, wondering if there was any way for him to give Jackie a ride on a dragoncycle. He was sure she would love that. “By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask: Is no one else concerned with the fact that Janna is obviously evil or possessed or something?”

“Said the soul-bonded love-thrall of the undead princess, while riding a thestral,” a voice behind and above him pointed out sarcastically. Marco almost fell of his flying horse as the
troublemaker’s winged form swooped down right besides him, effortlessly catching up to the two of them. He veered sharply away from her on instinct. “Relax, Marco, I am no more evil than I was a month ago.”

To the boy, who had grown up knowing Janna, that was not entirely reassuring.

“Ok, Janna, I’ll bite,” Jackie said, riding a small current and passing Marco from below to find herself flying side by side with Janna. “What’s up with the wings and flowing shadows and stuff? Since when do you have magical powers?”

“Well, originally?” the troublemaker girl pretended to think. “Since I did the nasty with Tom in the middle of a cemetery.”

Jackie raised an eyebrow, Marco just frowned.

“What? Like you two are ones to judge!” she shrugged. The movement sent her a few meters up as her wings responded to her muscles. “Damn! Still not used to these things... So, anyways, Tom was teaching me magic, and apparently it turns out I can draw power from him. Let me tell you, there is a lot more power inside your average demon than in all the corpses in Echo Creek’s graveyard, and Tom is not really your average demon.”

“Fine, I get it,” Marco spoke, drawing on his own experience with magic to fill in the details Janna was glossing over, probably on purpose. “That’s how you could create fireballs and shoot lightning and all that stuff we saw you do that night at Tom’s place. But it doesn’t explain now. Tom seemed shocked when he saw you swoop in just now and, well, aren’t you two...” he trailed off.

“Broken up?” Janna said flatly. She glanced up to where Star and Tom were flying together, laughing about something. The princess punched the demon in the arm and he just seemed to laugh louder. “I couldn’t care less if he fell into one of those cracks of fire right now. We are done, and I don’t think I can draw power from him without being... close. Fortunately, I found a better source.”

“Right,” Marco said simply. “I mean, I am sorry to hear that... about you and Tom, I mean,” he added as an afterthought. He was, frankly, far more concerned about the other thing she had mentioned. “But, well, what about that new source? What is it?”

“Marco, you really shouldn’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to.” Janna looked at her hand. There was something there, a tattoo of a snake wrapped four times around her left index finger, covering most of the digit in black ink.

“See, Janna,” Marco pointed out, “that’s not exactly the kind of thing you say when you want people to not worry about what the literal hell is going on with you...”

“Right, right,” she retorted. “So, basically, dabbling in the dark arts is only fine when it’s your cheating girlfriend doing it, right? Maybe you should spend less time worrying about me, and more time worrying about her. I don’t care anymore what she and Tom are up to over there, but I would have thought you might. Then again, I don’t understand you guys, for all I know it is Tom’s turn to bang the bug tonight!”

Marco was about to rise to the bait, when Jackie cut him off, “Janna, we do worry about Star. And perhaps, in worrying about Star, we missed some of the stuff that was going on with you. I am really sorry if that was the case. Look, we are your friends, we have known you for years. If you say you are fine, then you are fine, but I’d still would like to know what you are dealing with, exactly...”
“Fine, you want to know, Jackie? You really really want to know?” Janna grumbled back, annoyed. Then she pointed upwards, towards the open wound in the sky, towards the deep maw that was the true form of the Endless Shadow. “Sam made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. His power, some of it, enough to do pretty much anything I can dream of, maybe everything Star can... I no longer have to depend on Tom, or anyone else.”

Jackie paused for a second, then, very gently, she said, “I imagine there is a catch...”

“Sure there is,” Janna admitted. She showed them her open palm, the viper tattoo around her finger. “Whenever I cast magic, this mark thing grows in size and inches towards the center of my body. The more powerful the spell, the more it grows. Eventually it will wrap around my torso and then reach towards my heart. It will bite it, and I will die. When I die, my soul comes right back here, and, well... you get the idea. So, sure, the ending is bad, but it’s not like I expected something different, you know? Not since I learned for a fact that demons and hell are real. It will be years, even decades, before I exhaust this kind of power and, until I do, well, the world is my oyster!”

“Sure,” Marco muttered, “Don’t worry guys, I only sold my soul to the devil!”

Janna glared at him. “At least, when I pay with souls, I sell my own, Marco. I don’t gift my girlfriend’s to the ‘Dark Queen Ascending’. Bet you that turns out alright!” she said sarcastically.

“Wait a minute, Janna, how the hell do you know about that!?” Marco shouted. She had said something about him being ‘soul-bonded’ to Star before. It only now occurred to Marco that she shouldn’t have heard anything about that.

“Wouldn’t you like to know...?” Janna grinned, and with a deliberate shrug, she pushed herself far up into the air, where she began rapidly gliding away from them.

Jackie sighed. “Marco, dude, I love you, but that was really dumb.”

“I... Sorry, Jackie, I thought we agreed that the Blood Moon stuff was the only option I had last night and...” he tried to apologize.

“Not that!” Jackie stopped him. “I mean... Janna.”

Oh. Right.

“So, you are also worried about what she just said?” Marco asked.

“Of course I am worried! She made another deal with Sam,” the girl pointed out. “It’s not like Janna is an idiot. She must know there is no way that one ends any better than the one before. If anything, we got lucky back there. So there must be a reason why she was willing to take it, even knowing that.”

Marco almost missed the fact that Jackie’s hand had come to meaningfully rest in the nacre scabbard to her side right as she said that.

“Let me talk to her alone, ok?” she asked Marco. “I think I might have an easier time getting to her, or at least making sure she knows we are here when she wants to talk about it.”

He nodded, and Jackie tugged at the horse’s reins, taking off after their mutual childhood friend.

“See that, Star? That’s one of the exits out of Sam’s domain,” Tom explained, pointing at the
narrow passage between two huge intersecting black spikes sprouting from two separate groundbridges below. “It’s not yet the one we want, so don’t fly in between. But the portal we are looking for is very likely going to be similar.”

In a standard euclidean space, there would not have been anything special behind the pillars. Certainly, if they went around the arch, they would see nothing but more burning fissures and narrow bridges as far as the eye could see. Sam’s domain was, after all, spherical, albeit not quite in the way Earth was. It was oriented inside-out, with what they perceived as the ground being the inside surface rather than the outside surface of the globe. Either way, it was large enough that it looked flat. It would have taken great powers of observation for most mortals to even notice that the horizon curved slightly upwards before fading into the distance, rather than slightly downwards. Even the demon prince could only tell this because of what he already knew of the infernal topography of the place.

Of course, none of that had any bearing on what could be seen on the other side of the intersecting spikes, or what could be reached by navigating right through the middle of that primitive archway. Going that way, an entirely different world opened up. One of dark red bleeding soil and a sky clouded with buzzing insect swarms.

“Ugh, that looks really gross, Tom,” Star pointed out, regarding the view on the other side of the archway.

“I know! It smells even worse! Isn’t that great?” he joked.

Inwardly, Tom had to admit he was actually happy they weren’t going that way. The ground on the other side of the portal was made of rotting flesh and bone, and inhabited by maggots the size of blue whales. Even flying over it would be unpleasant, due to the huge clouds of flies, yes, but also to the overwhelming odor of diseased putrefaction. Still, baiting Star with this kind of stuff was always fun.

“Whatsoever, you do you, Tom,” she shrugged, disgusted. They flew past the dimensional gate, without looking back.

In a way, this was the least awkward that their friendship had felt in a long time. It was definitely less nerve wracking than the year he spent pining after her, looking for ways to get back together. But also, Star seemed in a better mood than any he had seen her in since her mom’s death. That was great news! The girl was insanely strong, after all, mentally as well as physically, and seemed to be well on her way to recovering. The demon prince supposed her relationship with Marco and Jackie helped with that. Well, if that’s what it took, then it was fine by him, really.

“Hey, how are you guys doing?” asked a voice behind them, as another thestral caught up to the ones he and the princess were riding. Ah, speaking of the humans...

“Hey, Marco!” Tom answered cheerfully.

“Marco!” Star greeted her boyfriend brightly, flying closer towards him. “Everything alright back there?”

“Um. Yeah. I mean, well, it is under control,” the boy replied. “You know Janna. Nothing major, though. How about you? How are you holding, Star?”

“Pfff, I am fine, Marco,” Star said, waving the non-wand hand around, dismissively. “This place is super creepy, but from way up here, well, this is almost fun! Yeah, totally fun... totally...”
Marco didn’t say a word.

“Ok, fine! I am nervous, Marco. I am scared,” Star admitted. “I keep waiting for Sam to pop out from nowhere and say that letting us go last night was just another joke. Even once we get out of his domain, well, the thing that killed my mom is out there. We barely survived the last two times we faced it. Don’t get me wrong, I do want to find it. I want to avenge my mom and save Mewni and Earth, I really do. But I am also scared…”

“Yeah,” Marco agreed. “Look, Star, it’s good to be scared. I am scared too. It means we are alert, that we are ready. The last two times, well, it caught us by surprise. It ambushed us. Now we are expecting it. You have your awesome new wand, Jackie has the glass blade, I have... well, it’s a long story. The point is, it will be different this time. I know we can beat this thing!”

Star nodded and smiled again. “Marco?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for still being here.”

“I’ll always be here, Star. You are my best friend.”

“Awww, you two,” Tom interjected. He grinned as both Star and Marco blushed ever so slightly, realizing he was still there with them.

Honestly, he felt a bit weird around those two, despite it all. He hoped the other boy wasn’t mad about him and Star flying ahead. He really hadn’t meant anything by that. It was, just, well, he had wanted to make sure things were all cool between them, and fortunately it seemed they were. Better than he had expected, actually.

“Look, I can leave you two alone if you want some privacy,” he offered.

“Actually, Tom, I sort of want to talk to you,” Marco replied. “One on one, if you two don’t mind.”

Ouch. What had he done now? Tom thought back to the last few hours, trying to look for something else he had messed up. Or, maybe, they hadn’t finished talking about the thing two nights ago. Well, yeah, he could understand if Marco was still pissed about that, actually. Or worried. That too.

“Sure, Marco,” Tom replied, equably. “Star?”

“Yeah, yeah, you two go ahead and have your guy talk, or whatever,” she offered. “Just, tell me when we need to take a portal or change course or anything like that, ok?”

Right. Tom nodded. After all, he was their best navigator as far as traversing hell was concerned. He had memorized the route before the night of the green lizard ghost, and still remembered the rest of the way from here. “We’ll fly ahead, Star, you girls just need to follow behind us men for a bit.”

He punctuated that statement with a cocky grin. Star rolled her eyes at that, but Tom noticed she was still smiling.

The demon prince and Marco flew a bit higher, and a bit faster, taking point in the group’s formation. Once they were alone, Tom’s face fell back into a guilty expression.

“Look, man, if this is about the other night: again, I am sorry. I’ll let you land one free punch on
me once we are back on the ground, if that makes you feel better,” he offered.

“What?” Marco asked surprised. “No, Tom, that’s... well, whatever, that happened, and we all talked it, and we reached an agreement. Look, it is not like I own Star or anything. Actually, that’s kind of the problem... I want to ask you... what do you know about the Blood Moon?”

“The Blood Moon?” Tom asked. Crap! He was so busy worrying about the awful shit he had done to them recently, that he hadn’t thought back to the awful shit he had put them through before. “Look, Marco, I am sorry, I was a different person back then and...”

“Tom, I crashed your home and ruined your party that night; out of jealousy! Basically, neither of us covered ourselves in glory back then,” the boy shrugged. “That’s also not why I am asking. I think something happened, you know, to Star and I, that night, when we danced at the ball...”

All of Tom’s three eyes went wide, and he almost fell of the thestral. “You two are soul bonded by the Blood Moon!”

No wonder his attempts to win Star back had gone as badly as they did. He was doomed from the start! Or they were doomed. Or, well… That was cheating! That dance had been for him! It could have been him, couldn’t it? But it was Marco instead. To think Tom had been apologizing to him about that night! The human should apologize to both Star, and to him!

Wait, no, no, that wasn’t him anymore. Tom forced his eyes shut and counted to ten.

Marco wasn’t at fault. Star wasn’t at fault. And it couldn’t have been him. The Blood Moon chose the souls it joined together. It couldn’t be tricked. Tom knew that. He had just hoped, back then, that if he and Star were close when the choosing happened, then maybe it would turn out they were meant to be. Instead, it chose her and Marco.

As for himself and the princess, well, it was clear, in retrospect, why that hadn’t worked out, Blood Moon or no Blood Moon. The demon had simply learned some lessons way too late. If Marco hadn’t been there, and him and Star had danced together that night instead, then likely nothing would have happened, and the Blood Moon would have just chosen a different couple.

“Hey, man, everything ok?” Marco asked worried.

“Ah, yes, of course,” he forced a smile. “Look, it’s just... such a surprise... Congratulations! No, really! It’s really cool. If the Blood Moon picks you two, that means you now have something really special, something that happens only to two lucky people in all the worlds, once every six hundred and sixty-seven years...” he concluded with a genuine grin. “Well, as I keep saying: you are such an infuriatingly lucky bastard!” he laughed.

Honestly, it was kind of cool to have his two best friends be this lucky, when you looked at it that way.

“Well, actually, Tom,” Marco spoke, cautiously, “Jackie might have also been joined to us by the Blood Moon... last night.”

Wait. What!?

Once again, only a last minute reaction on the part of the flying horse itself prevented the demon prince from falling down from its back.

For the following half an hour, Tom listened to the weirdest tale he had ever heard, even after all that had happened to them in the past week. He was sure that Marco was leaving out a lot of the
details of what occurred before and after the green ghost’s attack, either for his sake or for that of Star’s privacy. Tom was, honestly, thankful for that. After this morning’s chat with Star and Jackie, he truly felt that he knew too much about that already. He didn’t dare interrupt until the human was done, only nodding and frowning in response as appropriate.

“So that’s the situation,” Marco concluded, “Bond or not, I am happy to always be there for Star and for Jackie. But, I had a dream last night, and it reminded me just how dangerous it is to get involved with supernatural forces. Particularly when you don’t understand how they work or what are the terms, so to speak,” the boy winced. There was, clearly, more to that than what he was saying. “So, if you know anything I don’t, then it might be important for me to hear it.”

“Look, Marco, the Blood Moon Ball is a very old tradition,” Tom explained. “I’ve only been to a few, and never before have I met a chosen couple. It’s not like I know all of the details. The legend is that it happens every six hundred and sixty-seven years, and the Blood Moon chooses two people, usually two lovers, to have their souls, their destinies, linked for all eternity. There are some tales about that bond being used to find each others across dimensions, or to break evil curses, some even say the Blood Moon bond is a curse in and of itself, but all those stories are more like fables than anything else, you never know what’s literal and what isn’t…”

Apparently, the part about breaking curses was at least partly true, based on what Marco had just told him. He tried to think of any other legends that might come in handy, if they were true.

“Mmm, it is said that the Blood Moon appears to the lovers when one of them is in danger, and fate conspires to keep them together. That’s all I know. In any case, I have never heard of it choosing three people,” he added. “Sorry, Marco. That really is all I got, and… wait!”

Tom turned around and shouted as loudly as he could. “Star, that’s it! That’s the exit we want!”

He pointed at a small cloud of fog at the end of one of the bridges below them. The strip of ground curved sharply upwards and then ended as it met the fog. Through the mist, a huge stone archway could be dimly seen, large enough to accommodate two winged horses, side by side, wing tip to wing tip. Star signaled the other two with a sort of magical flare, and all five of them made a dive for it.

“Everyone alert,” shouted the princess, her voice amplified by magic. “Remember, we are leaving Sam’s domain!”

They all knew what that meant.

----

Jackie’s attempts to reach Janna were a resounding failure. The winged girl just ran circles around her and her horse whenever she so much as tried to get close to her. Janna didn’t want to talk, and no power on Earth or Hell could force her to listen. Eventually, Jackie relented, flying behind the rest of the formation, as Tom and Marco took point.

Star joined the two boys soon after they made it past the first portal. The human girl gave all three of them some space for a change. She used the time to reflect on last night, and to check out their, decidedly creepy, surroundings.

They crossed the foggy gate out of Sam’s domain into a world of empty darkness and frozen polyhedral shapes, like icebergs floating in the nothingness. They flew up, there, almost vertically, for hours, until they found a frozen perfect pyramid. They went into it through its base, as if it were the surface of a lake, feeling a slight and transitory wet sensation as they crossed through what had
seemed like solid glass.

They came out through a black oil pool into a sunless land, where ghostly giants of shadow shambled across a marsh-like hellscape. That world’s own exit was through the gargantuan mouth of a titanic corpse, the only one seemly made of flesh rather than darkness. It was humanoid. Its stomach had been cut open, and its entrails nailed to the heavenly vault, forcing it to stand up or, at least, keeping it from falling backwards entirely. Jackie noticed that its exposed heart was still beating, slowly.

“Is this the most metal thing you guys have seen or what!?” shouted the demon prince cheerfully for all to hear, right before his horse made a dive for the dead giant’s agonized face.

It was a good thing that Tom seemed to know where they were going. None of those bizarre paths would have ever occurred to Jackie.

The last hell they saw was pleasant by comparison: an endless pitch black ocean as far as the eye could see, smooth as a mirror in this windless world. The sky had no stars, and no aurora of souls like Sam’s did, but a low and diffuse white light seemed to come down from it. Up in the air, there were these huge black doors. Some just seemed to directly go to other worlds, once again having nothing behind them unless you went right through the opening. A few seemed to have a long silver staircase going upwards, but, again, only if you went directly through the gate.

Tom announced that this was the last dimension before reaching Hekapoo’s domain.

Jackie’s educated guess was that no-staircase meant a lateral move to another hellish dimension, and going upwards meant going back to the world of the living. A theory that seemed to hold as Marco performed his finding ritual again, at Tom’s request, and it guided them all towards one of the stair-connected doorways.

It was barely wide enough for their winged horses to go through.

“Everyone, dismount after you are on the stairs, I’ll stop the spell then,” Star shouted as she made it through. Her horse vanished as soon as it landed on the steps behind the door. In the same motion, the princess jumped down onto the stairway.

“Man, Star.” Marco was the second to land. His horse lingered around a few seconds longer than Star’s had, allowing him time to dismount. “Are you sure we can’t fly up the stairs too? They look really long!”

“Oh, they are excruciatingly long,” Tom offered helpfully, landing after him. “It’s one hundred and eight flights of stairs total, and one hundred and eight steps in each, so... eleven thousand steps or so? One guess as to how many of these staircases are out there too, by the way,” he chuckled. “But, like I was saying, if we fly too far away from the steps, they will vanish, and we will have to start over again. You really need to walk them all. There is no other way.”

“This really is hell,” Marco complained, overly dramatically. Star and Tom laughed, as did Jackie once she caught up to them.

“Come on, dude, a little exercise never killed anyone,” she pointed out. “Besides, can you imagine a place like this but with a ramp going down? That would be pretty rad for skateboarding!”

Marco seemed to doubt that assertion, which only made Jackie chuckle some more.

“Hey, guys, question, do we have any food?” Tom pointed out. “I am starving.”
“UNREASONABLY VARIED FLAVORS MUFFIN BLAST!” cried Star, pointing her wand at the platform in front of them.

Out of the golden star crystal, for it was a crystal again and not a true star, came a pressurized stream of muffins, as if from a bursting muffin-filled fire hydrant. The pastries themselves were of all shapes and colors, with bits and pieces of different kinds of foodstuffs inside them. They bounced off of the ground at some speed, most of them falling over the side of the stairs, down into the dark ocean below.

Star herself caught a few in her arms as they ricocheted, offering them to the other teens. Tom grabbed a red one from the ground and bit into it unconcerned.

“Uh, isn’t that kind of dirty?” Marco protested.

“Marco, there hasn’t been a living soul walking this stairs for thousands of years,” retorted Tom. “This is basically a sterile surface. Mmmmm... coagulated blood, eyeballs, and ‘Bird’s Eye’ chili peppers? Nice work, Star!”

Clearly the ‘unreasonably varied flavors’ part of the spell in action. The human boy made a nauseated face at that, and Jackie couldn’t say she blamed him.

“Here, Marco, have these two,” Star offered. “And Jackie, maybe... these two?”

Hers were, respectively, a sourdough and avocado muffin with egg, and some sort of mango and ginseng root cupcake. Actually, they weren’t half bad! The first was like avocado toast wrapped on itself with a poached egg in the center, savory, semi-healthy, and pretty filling, some sort of brunch singularity.

“Is this a ‘mole con pollo’ muffin, Star?” Marco asked in surprise, after finally deciding to bite into his. “Mmm... this is... good... but sooo weird, but... mmmhf... so good! Man, thanks Star!”

Star kept a bunch of bright colored, and rather sugary looking, muffins for herself. Behind the rest of the group, Janna picked up a plain brown one and a bright pink cupcake, without saying a word.

They ate as they walked up, going around in a square spiral. It was a repeating pattern of 108 steps up, flat platform, ninety degree left turn, then the next flight of stairs. They were wide, more than wide enough for all five of them to travel side by side. Still, they naturally separated slightly over time.

Somehow, Marco and Tom paired up, leaving her and Star marching together ahead of them. Janna was all the way to the back and, after some more failed attempts, all of them eventually gave up on trying to talk to her.

“So, did we just call upon the forbidden arts to get me a mango cupcake, Star?” Jackie joked.

The princess chuckled. “Nah, Jackie. That’s not how dark magic works,” she corrected her. “It would probably be something like, ‘from far stars and burning lakes, I’d give my soul for some cupcakes’,“ she recited mockingly.

Then she looked startled for a second, as if realizing what she had just said.

They both glanced at the mewman’s wand, and held their breath.

Fortunately, nothing happened. They both laughed nervously.
“Star, please, no more rhymes, ok?” Jackie pleaded with a smirk.

“Well, not for cupcakes, that’s for sure!” retorted Star.

There was more laughter, and then a brief pause.

“Hey, Star, I think there is something I need to tell you,” Jackie begun.

Star’s posture shifted a bit. She seemed worried, for some reason, which only made the human more nervous about this, “Ah, sure, Jackie, what is it?”

“I was jealous. Of you and Marco,” Jackie spit it out.

“What?!” The princess almost missed a step. “But… but… but I thought you didn’t get jealous?”

“So did I, dude,” Jackie shrugged. “Turns out I didn’t know myself as well as I thought.”

“I... I can still back off, you know? Even now, if you two want to be alone... I think...” Star stammered.

“No! No, nothing like that,” Jackie clarified, horrified. “Star, I am still happy you two are together, I really am. I am just saying that I can feel, well, left out, worried on whether I am as important as you two are to each other...”

“Jackie!” Star interrupted. “Marco had a gigantic crush on you before he even knew me, and he still does. If anything, I have more of a reason to feel jealous!”

Jackie smiled. “You know that I can argue against that, right? You know you two are closer than almost anyone else, have been so almost since the day you arrived at Echo Creek, and that’s without even bringing up the soul bond stuff. But, that’s not my point. It’s not a contest. I just wanted to confess. To tell you that I was worried, and afraid, and messed up, and that’s why I wanted to see you two do it. It was wonderful, it really was, and I am not worried anymore. But I feel like I sprung that up on you two under false pretenses. So, I am sorry about that.”

Star frowned. “There is nothing you need to apologize for, Jackie. There is a total of one person that should apologize about that night, and is obviously the one who almost got us all killed... which is, well, me.”

Jackie made a dismissive gesture.

“But, anyways,” Star continued, “are you sure you don’t want Marco just for yourself?”

They were getting closer and closer to the top of the stairs.

“Actually, Star, not at all,” Jackie said, blushing. “After last night, I think I really want to be... around the both of you.”

“Oh,” Star said simply. Then, wide-eyed, she exclaimed, “Oh!”

The princess turned to look at the human girl. Her expression was one of unreadable shock. “Around how?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Jackie tried to explain. “Look, it’s just, I enjoyed last night, not counting you-know-what, and I really liked you being there. It’s not like I feel the same things about Marco and about you, and I don’t expect you to feel the same back either, it’s just, I dunno, dude...”
Star pulled Jackie into a quick but strong hug and gave her a peck on the cheek. Then she moved away just as quickly. “Look, Jackie, I am not sure I am on the same page. Looks like we don’t even know what the page is. But we have time for figuring this out, right? For now, I am just glad that I have both you and Marco, as friends and as... whatever else. Is that fair?”


They walked in silence for one full flight of stairs.

“Star,” Jackie turned around and said, with an innocent smile, “I love you.”

Star almost tripped. “Like... love-love?”

Jackie shrugged, “No idea, dude.” It was the truth. “But some kind of love, anyways.”

“I...” Star stammered.

“Nah, don’t force it,” the human girl stopped the princess.

“I think you are the most crazy-awesome person in the multiverse, then!” Star declared without missing a beat, and then it was Jackie’s turn to almost trip on a step.

They reached the corner, turned left, and then, Jackie froze.

She pulled her sword out of its scabbard.

Star frowned and lifted up the wand.

“How very touching,” spoke the smirking lizard as he walked down, hands behind his ghostly back.

He was on the platform before the final one, on the opposite corner of where the two girls stood. That was a distance of two flights of stairs, 216 steps up, and he was closing that gap fast, even without needing to run. The being of green flame had been waiting for them.

“And yet, despite all that, you rejected my generous offer. I suppose I am running out of options,” the creature observed.

“You could just go to hell!” Jackie shouted.

Toffee’s green fire phantasm just raised one eyebrow and glanced conspicuously around them. Jackie felt dumb. That had been a pretty lame comeback, considering where they still were.

Emerald flames began sprouting out of the staircase in front of the two of them as the ghost turned around the next platform. It raised a claw, and a small meteor of green flame flew towards her and Star.

With her sword unsheathed, working on instinct, Jackie took a step forward, lowered her stance and slashed fiercely at the fireball. The glass blade cut the spell in half as if it were nothing more than a papier-mâché globe, the blazes harmlessly dissipating into thin air.

A blink, and Star’s mom, made of translucent glaucous insubstance, was charging down the stairs. As the creature took Moon’s form, a bright energy sword appeared in her right hand. Jackie braced herself for combat.

She parried Moon’s strike, deflecting it away from her body. Quickly, she tried to riposte, only for
the translucent form of the Queen to jump back, avoiding the counter-attack. Before Jackie could get her guard up again, Star’s mom was back in the offensive, her phantasmal blade falling towards her in a vicious slashing assault.

The green ghost’s blade hit instead a glittering barrier. Between it and Jackie, a pink shielding half-bubble had appeared. Star stepped in front of the human girl then, a determined look in her eyes, her wand still raised after the defensive spell she had just cast. The bubble pushed the ghost’s form backwards. Not-Moon fell to the ground, but quickly rolled herself back up and away from the princess’ shield.

Before either their foe or Star could do anything else, a pair of bright red fireballs came flying out from behind the two girls, followed by a guttural war cry as Tom caught up to them. The apparition jumped back once more to avoid the attack, and turned into Hekapoo.

“Oh no, not this time!” came another voice behind them. Marco, also catching up.

Jackie couldn’t turn around to see what he was doing, since she was trying not to lift her eyes from the being. But she heard him say something in a language she couldn’t recognize.

Tom fired three more fireballs at the creature, around the sides of Star’s barrier. The Hekapoo look-alike simply cut them with the detached blades of a ghostly pair of dimensional scissors. “Nice try, kid, but, seriously, this does not concern you, and you no longer have the home field advantage.”

“We don’t need it anymore, H-poo,” spoke Marco in a low manly voice. “Haven’t you realized that already? Things are different this time around, and we are afraid of no ghosts.”

He stepped in front of everyone else and pushed both hands forward as if he were trying to open an enormous double door in mid air. Marco’s entire body glowed with a faint white light. An invisible force flung the fake Hekapoo’s arms to the sides in response to the boy’s gesture.

The ghost froze there, as if its wrists were nailed to an invisible cross. It struggled violently, but it seemed it couldn’t get out of whatever was holding it. Marco frowned, sweat dripping down his forehead.

“Star, drop the barrier and finish it!” Marco shouted.

The pink glittering shield went down.

“I call the darkness unto me, from deepest depths of earth and sea...”

“Star, wait!” shouted Glossaryck, still immobilized. It was a trick, of course, another viridescent illusion worn as a mask by their duplicitous enemy.

“...from ancient evils unawoken, to break the one who can’t be broken...”

“Star, sweetie?” the phantasmal emerald form of Moon pleaded to her daughter.

“...To blackest night I pledge my soul, and crush my heart to burning coal...”

“I am only doing what you asked for, Star, what your heart wished for,” Toffee’s ghost explained, speaking hurriedly over the mewman’s muttering of the spell. Clearly, the creature was running out of options. “Ending this form won’t change that.”

“...to summon forth the deathly power...”
The being began shifting one more time, and this time, it wasn’t any of the people Jackie had seen the monster imitate before. It was some sort of midget bald bird, barely taller than Glossaryck had been. It had a misshapen curved beak, a head way too big for his body, and a long braided beard. All of it rendered in burning green spectral fire. She recognized it as the same person that had once stolen Star’s book of spells, that night of her own first date with Marco. Just, you know, without the clown costume.

“Allright, fine, kill me again, won’t you?” the chicken-like dwarf squawked. “Whatever! Go ahead, blow me to bits! No big deal. What else should I have expected? Gratitude? Nah. Of course not! I suppose you also don’t want to know how you called me to this reality. We can all try this again once you get to the rest of me. Only, well... I hope you dinguses don’t expect to find us in a talking mood then. Go on, princess, make it quick!”

Star frowned. The wand still pointed directly at the center of the pitiful creature.

“You want to talk, ‘Ludo’? ...Fine. Talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, there it is, I give up, I might have succumbed to your pleading in the comments and decided to give you your deepest heart desire: Starkie begins! ;)

Also, what a great turn around for our protagonists! Star is doing alright, our main three are happy and in love, Tom is feeling fine, hanging out with his best friends! Janna is... well, she got the power she wanted! They are literally steps away from exiting hell. They survived Sam and subdued our villain once again! What do you say? Time to call it for a Part III happy ending next chapter?

**Coming up next: Chapter 31: Unveil to Me What is Forbidden**

... Oh.
Unveil to Me What is Forbidden

Chapter Summary

In which dark truths are learned, alternative worlds discussed, and a truly grave line is crossed.

Chapter Notes

Update December 2018: (ignore if you started reading this story in 2019 or after)

For the last 7 months, I have been working on a major re-edit to the first three parts of I Summon the All-Seeing Eye. That re-edit is the version you are now seeing.

If you have read a previous version of IStASE Parts I-III (e.g. before Dec 2018), you should be ok to start reading Part IV when it starts coming out in January 2019. The point at which the story ends is not too different from before.

If you still want to get an idea of what changed, but would rather not re-read 500+ pages of fanfiction (btw, holy crap!), here are the most important changes:

1. New: The last scene of Chapter 21, the entire Chapter 22 (which is a newly added chapter, containing two heavily rewritten scenes and four brand new ones), and the first half of Chapter 23 (before Janna’s initial scene) comprise the biggest change to the story. Without spoiling the reveal in those chapters: some of the stuff there will come up later in the story, just not right at the start of Part IV.

2. New: Chapter 28’s second scene (the one beginning with 'The surface of') is also brand new, and expands upon one of the new scenes above.

I’d recommend reading those bits, at least, while you wait for Part IV to drop.

Additionally, there are a bunch of changes that don’t alter the plot, but do significantly rewrite existing scenes. For example, some of Chapter’s 12 lyrics from Star’s "altered" princess song have been changed to better fit the original music (don’t worry, the Raperriot part remains unchanged). Her scene with Raperriot in Chapter 11 is another example, among many others I can’t be bothered to list or remember.

Plus, hopefully more typo fixes than newly minted typos... but I can't actually promise that :)

Of course, the most important news: This fic is not dead, and, come 2019, Part IV begins.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Chapter 31: Unveil to Me What is Forbidden

The real burning star in the middle of the magic wand was currently a rotating sphere of dark purple flames. It held a spell of hate and death at the ready, one phrase away from its completion. *‘To see my hated foe devoured’* was all Star would have to say, and it would be done: no more ghost Ludo, or ghost Toffee, or ghost not-her-mom. No matter what form it took, the mewman was prepared to end this thing’s existence the moment it so much as twitched unexpectedly. She kept the wand pointed straight at the emerald phantasm’s heart.

Jackie had taken position behind the green creature of fire and dread, currently made to resemble the pitiable bird monster. The human girl had Sam’s glass sword not only drawn, but pointed straight at the back of its translucent skull. She had pulled it backwards far enough that she could put some very real momentum behind it, at a moment’s notice. One wrong move, and she would plunge the blade into the apparition. Sure, normally that would be an empty threat towards an immaterial enemy, but they all had just seen the glass blade cut a fireball in two. Whatever the devil weapon was, its edge seemed to cut things beyond mere physical substance.

Star had seen it perhaps more clearly than Jackie herself had. She noticed that the rapier had torn not only the effect, but the fundamental pattern of their enemy’s magic. The princess had seen Sam do something similar once during their fight, when he slapped her spell away with the back of his hand and it shattered like glass rather than merely being deflected. It was quite clear to her now that a solid target was not a requirement as far as the weapon was concerned. Good.

To Star’s right, Marco held both arms extended in front of him, hands balled into tense fists. He looked alert but calm. Apparently holding on to the creature using the ritual was easier when it wasn’t trying to fight back. Ludo’s tiny ugly arms remained extended to both sides of his form, as the monster’s body floated in mid air, immobilized by some magic even Star didn’t fully understand. As a backup, black chains held his feet, arms, and neck. Tom had summoned those. The demon prince was himself now positioned at their enemy’s five o’clock, alert and ready. They had it well and truly surrounded.

“Seriously? Is all of this really necessary? That’s two sets of restraints, and two means of execution, for corn sake! Don’t you idiots think this is a little too much?” complained Ludo.

“No,” the mewman replied coldly. “No, we don’t.”

If anything, it might not be enough. But she wanted to know, she needed to know, what this was really all about. Besides, Marco had told her about his dream, the one from over a week ago, about Hekapoo’s warning: ‘an aspect for an aspect’, was it?

So, whatever this creature was, it was not the being that killed her mom. It was a part of it, perhaps, like a tree is part of a forest, like a drop of water was part of the storm. But it wasn’t the full thing. The storm was still out there. They needed to know about the storm.

“Well, you see, princess,” the being of green flames explained, sardonically, “this, right here, this is your problem. You want this to be a fight, you are looking for a fight, and so, that’s what you find. Such a violent girl!” Ludo mocked her. “You have it all wrong, you know? I was never your enemy. We were never your enemy. We want what you want... quite literally.”

Star’s grip on the wand tightened, “Right. So you are going to tell me you didn’t kill my mom!”

“Ah...well, you see... mhm... that... That was somewhat of a... miscalculation on our part, an
honest mistake,” Ludo stammered. “Really wish we could lie, by the way. It’d come real handy right about now. But, well, we can’t, you know? So, no, I guess I can’t really tell you that.”

Star’s cheekmarks gradually turned black with anger and hatred. The deadly spell no longer seemed to burn her veins since her resurrection, but dark storm clouds had begun forming all around them: a veritable hurricane of shadows around the huge floating staircase, with them all inside the fragile calm of its proverbial eye.

“Well, that does it! I am leaving before this obviously dumb idea turns into a real shit show,” declared Janna suddenly.

She began walking towards their captive, or, more likely, past him, headed towards the big obsidian archway at the end of the stairs, two floors up. Presumably, that was their door out of hell, and into Hekapoo’s domain. Unlike the other portals, there was no visible otherworldly scene past this one, just a swirling whirlpool of orange and golden fire. It looked very much like one of Hekapoo’s habitual portals, just larger, and, well, more permanent.

“Janna, you do remember that this asshole tried to kill you as well, right?” Star asked, irritated. She was still not sure what the hell was the witch’s problem. Frankly, if she did good on her threat to strike out on her own after this, then good riddance! Star wasn’t even sure why she was trying to convince her to stay for the interrogation. If the human didn’t care about getting revenge on this monster, then that was her problem, not Star’s.

Janna let out an annoyed grunt, the flesh membrane of her wings shuffling behind her as she did that. “Yeah, and that was to get to you! If I leave now, then I won’t have to worry about him or about you. Look, if you are going to kill it, then I am all for it. But kill it now, before he goads you into yet another stupid mistake...”

“Oh. It’s funny, you know?” the monster interjected. “I think Janna and I would have understood each other quite well. I mean, her and Ludo, not, you know, the actual us. Both struggling harder than anyone else, just to try and fail to get to the same place that others simply started from. Both unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time... the punchline of a cosmic joke they don’t even get to understand... ha. ha. HA!”

Janna glanced disinterestedly at her tattooed finger. “Whatever. Just leave me out of this!” she huffed, but sat back down on the stair steps.

“You were always out of this,” replied the ghost with a vicious grin. The witch tried to appear nonchalant, but even the mewman noticed the tense way in which her hand had balled up into a shaking fist without thinking.

“Ok, enough!” Star interrupted. She so didn’t care about Janna and her issues right now. “So, you say you can’t lie? Ok, then, tell me, do you have a name!? We know you are not Ludo, or Toffee, or... anyone else we know. And don’t give me any of that ‘Love, All-Conquering’, ‘Will, Unbending’, bullshit!”

“Heh heh. It is not bullshit, princess,” retorted the emerald apparition. “We are hope, and will, and love. We are the wellspring of goddamn living potential. We are the spark inside this poor pathetic creature striving to amass power he barely understands for the sake of a familial love he doesn’t even realize he needs. We are the demon prince willing to deal with the stuff of his own nightmares to help out his unavailable crush. We are the fucking proverbial ‘why not?’ that you children so cherish!”
Wait! How did it even know anything about that last part?

The thing wearing Ludo’s face continued, “and, specifically, we are your potential, Star Butterfly. We are your hope, your will, your love. That, and so much more. If you must have a name for us, you might as well call us... Wish... for we are the wish of your deepest heart desire! That, princess, is who, and what, we are.”

“That is a load of crap!” Star yelled furiously, a violet glow sparking behind her eyes. “I didn’t wish for my mom to be dead! I didn’t wish for Hekapoo, or Glossaryck, or even Ludo, to die!”

“Of course you didn’t,” Wish retorted calmly. “Your mom and Ludo just got in the way of what you really wanted, and paid the price. Wrong time, wrong place. To bad, so sad. You see, there was once a world where Ludo survived, one where Toffee murdered your mum, and Hekapoo and Glossaryck too, and where you, in turn, killed him. But, more importantly, in that world, you confessed your feelings for Marco... and he rejected you! Broke your precious little heart, let me tell you.”

The bird monster laughed raucously to her face.

“Wait a moment,” Marco protested, keeping his arms raised, restraining their foe. “What the hell are you talking about? I could never do that! I love Star, she is my best friend, and an amazing girlfriend, and, ah, our souls are bonded, and...”

“... and without me, you would have ignored her and humiliated her, let her flee back to Mewni alone to face the choice of war or exile,” ‘Ludo’ explained. “But that world is no more. It will never be. That’s because the princess and I have a deal, because I answered her prayers just like the Blood Moon answered yours. That night, she wished for nothing else than for you to be together, she wished it with all her heart and soul... and we delivered.”

“No, no, no, no...” Star muttered horrified, realizing which day the being meant. “Not like that, not at the cost of my mom’s life, not at the cost of anyone’s life...”

“As you saw them together, embracing in the same adoring desire that your own heart held for the boy, you wished for Marco to love you, and you wanted him to have Jackie as well. In that moment, it was all that mattered,” Wish concluded. Then, his voice changed. It was now many voices, echoing atop each other, all female, and all very much like Star’s own, “You called me, Star Butterfly. To rewrite reality. To change destiny... To tear a hole into the sky!”

Tears began streaming down the princess’ cheeks, despite her best efforts not to cry. There was no way any of that was true. “You are lying!”

“I already told you,” Ludo’s voice retorted. He smirked as he said it, “we can’t lie.”

No. No! It really couldn’t be true! The All-Seeing Eye spell was just a scrying spell. Sure, spying was wrong, spying led to crying. But there was no way that dumb mistake had caused her mom’s death. There was no way that it had summoned this... this thing. It was just a damn scrying spell!

Then the mewman remembered something: ‘A scrying spell? Oh, dear. Is that what you think that is?’ Eclipsa’s words echoed inside Star’s head. She knew. That night after her mom’s funeral, Eclipsa already knew!

“So, we made it so you three ended up together,” Wish continued. “And to protect that oh so precious happily ever after, we removed the Septarian general as a factor, and then anyone who was able to see that reality had been changed. But, of course, mommy dear had to get in the way
and die anyways..."

Star felt, for the second time in twenty-four hours, as if she were suffocating. She had done this. Her spell had created, or summoned, this creature. She had killed her mom! It didn’t even matter that Moon was dead in that other world that the monster was talking about. It didn’t matter at all. Because, in this world, the cause of her mom’s death... was Star herself...

“And, of course, after that little slip, we just plain couldn’t get you to be happy with what you got out of the bargain!” Ludo’s form complained. “We tried everything! We tried to convince you to let go, to move on, to understand that your mom was now in a better place. But you wouldn’t have that. We threatened you, and your friends, to no avail. We even offered you all everlasting bliss, but your boyfriend pushed us away. Star, we mean you no harm. We just want you to be happy with the one, or the ones, you love, and leave us be, in turn, to pursue our own wish.”

She couldn’t take this anymore. Star was trembling. She had caused this? She had wanted this? Or, at least, it thought she wanted this? This had to be some sort of cruel joke. It couldn’t be true. Could it? Maybe, deep down, she really was an evil princess. She had killed her own mom, because, for a second, she had not cared what happened to anyone and anything else, as long as she had Marco, and he had Jackie. Star thought of Princess White. The vampire had bragged about murdering her own mother. Was Star just like her? A monster too?

The mewman’s legs failed her. In the last moment, she felt a pair of hands steadying her by the shoulders. Marco had rushed towards her the moment she began falling down, and was now the only thing keeping her standing.

“Star, are you ok?” the boy asked, pale with worry. “Look, this is not your fault. You didn’t want this. You didn’t wish for this. That thing twisted your spell. It is obvious to all of us that you wouldn’t have wanted to hurt your mom, for your own sake, or for mine. Besides, like I said, I loved you before that night... Being with you is the best thing I can possibly imagine, so I would have said yes, in this or any other world... So... so it must be lying! About that, and also about why it is here, about why it... you know. It simply must be! Star... This. Is. Not. Your. Fault.”

There was a loud screeching sound behind them, that of metal twisting and shattering.

“Uhm, Marco, Star, I don’t want to pressure you two now, but I kinda can’t hold him down on my own,” complained Tom. Star looked up to see the black chains melting and crackling around the ghost form, a form that was now half-way between Ludo and Toffee. The lizard smiled cruelly.

“We can all talk about this later, Star. For the record, what this monster did is definitely not your fault,” Jackie shouted. “But I think we learned all we needed to learn, so let’s kill this asshole!”

She followed those words with a piercing lunge. The human’s girl blade narrowly missed the lizard’s neck, as it twisted himself free from the chains. Not-Toffee sprung around and hit Jackie in the face with its burning emerald tail, throwing her against the stairs, knocking the human girl unconscious.

“Word of advice, girl: hit first, deliver the speech second,” the lizard offered, smugly.

That did it. It was the final drop.

“To see my HATED FOE DEVOURED!” shouted Star, releasing the deadly spell against the being of green flames.

She meant it. She meant it like she had never meant anything before. To kill this thing was truly
her heart’s deepest desire right now. She wanted it to die, she wanted it to suffer, she wanted everything that it was, everything that it represented, everything that it had done, everything that it had said, to be gobbled up by her hate.

She didn’t hit the heart, not directly. A huge lizard claw caught the blast of the spell in its palm. But it didn’t matter. Hate like hers would not be denied, could not be denied, not this time. Tendrils of magical darkness began spreading up through the abomination’s arm, its emerald brightness dimming as the death spell gnawed at its form. Toffee’s eyes reflected a look of surprise and terror she had never seen on the lizard, before or since his death. Star smiled, a maniacal glee filling the hole in her soul that had been carved up by the knowledge of her accidental matricide.

The magical resonance that had accompanied her previous attempts to use her spells on the fiery phantasm flared up. It made the princess’ entire body shake as if electrocuted. Yet she powered through, driven by rage and the euphoria of her anticipated victory.

“Argh! You think this will get rid of us? You think you have won? You know there is more to us than this form, Star! So much more,” threatened the creature, using Toffee’s voice, it’s reptilian face a grimace of unearthly pain. His right arm lit up in brightness one final time, and then exploded into a shower of green embers, just as the black tendrils begun creeping around the center of his chest and spreading all the way to its face and the tips of the fingers in his left hand. “You can’t beat us... Ugh!... You can’t undo your bargain... Argh!... But you can decide when you are done fighting... and letting innocents get caught in the way!”

Toffee smiled a big toothy smirk, and pointed his remaining claw at Janna. The witch’s eyes went wide. She sprung up of her sitting position, suddenly realizing that she was not sitting this battle out, after all.

Out of Toffee’s hand, the black and violet blast of Star’s spell emerged. The rest of the lizard’s burning form faded into nothingness with a bone-chilling scream and a harrowing mad laugh. Yet, the deadly spell continued, strong, towards Janna.

----

Janna’s body slid forcefully through the sharp edge of the stair step, her wing partly torn by the impact. The silver rim had cut a nasty gash across its more delicate membranous skin, and bent the cartilage supports the wrong way around. It was a pain unlike any she had felt before. It was a pain that she, most decidedly, did not enjoy. It was the bad kind of pain.

She forced herself to remember that the appendage was not originally part of her, that this, therefore, could not be a fatal wound. After all, all the ‘real’ parts of her were intact, superficially beaten up at most. She had been lucky.

No, not lucky. Not exactly.

Blood splattered her. Lots of it. Glowing crimson blood. Literally glowing, as if the red splashes were made of slowly cooling embers. She looked up. Horror dawned on her.

“Aaaahh! Urghh,” panted Tom. Clutching his right arm.

Or, rather… what little was left of it.

He held onto the cauterized stump that stood where an arm would have been. Two of his fingers, the only remains of his hand, lay atop Janna’s lap. That, and all the blood, was the only evidence that the demon prince had ever had an arm.
He had jumped towards her in the last minute. He had pushed her away from the path of Star’s spell. He was the one who had thrown her along the stair and broken her wing. He was the reason she was still alive at all. But the hand he had used to throw her out of the way had been caught in the blast instead. Now it wasn’t there. Instead, there remained only an irregular bump stopping inches away from Tom’s shoulder.

The demon boy was crying and howling in pain. Janna had never seen Tom hurt like that. Knowing how strong, how resilient, how damn near indestructible Tom was, only added to the horror.

Everything around her was silent, and moving way too fast. She had to remind herself to breathe.

She saw Star rush towards Tom, crying as well. She was doing something to him. Grabbing him. Restraining him. Tom couldn’t speak, he only opened his mouth to yell. Janna could barely hear his shouts over the deafening all-encompassing silence. Yet she knew they were lung tearing screams of agony. She could see that in all three of his red glowing and crying eyes. Not anger this time, just suffering, just pain.

Janna wanted Star to leave him the fuck alone! She wanted her to leave all of them the fuck alone! Wasn’t this enough for her? Hadn’t she hurt them enough already?

Somehow, the arm wasn’t growing back, not even a little. Tom could regenerate most injuries, Janna knew this first hand. But Star had done something to him, something he couldn’t heal.

No. Star had tried to do something to her. That spell had been headed for Janna.

Well, originally, it had gone after the ghost.

But the ghost was also Star’s fault! She created the creature, and in her attempt to kill it, she had almost killed Janna. She would have killed Janna. But Tom...

Tom interfered. Why? He was no longer her pretend boyfriend. The witch had never imagined he would care about her this much, even back when he was. Then, why? Just... why? Why did he have to do this!? The fucking idiot!

“Tom, calm down, it’s ok, it’s ok,” she finally heard what Star was saying.

How dare she?

How fucking dare she!?

It was not ok. He was never going to be ok, and it was all Star’s own fault.

“Get away from him!” Janna yelled, as she jumped up to her feet.

She should have known. No, she did know! She knew when they began this brain-dead tv-serial interrogation of theirs. She knew that it would turn badly. She knew, back in Sam’s place, that Star was eventually going to get one of them killed or... maimed. That was what she had done now. Wasn’t it? Got Tom’s goddamn arm disintegrated! Crippled him forevermore! And she had the nerve to say that was ok?

“Janna?” the mewman looked at her with wide surprised eyes. “Oh god... I am so sorry...”

No, she wasn’t, not nearly sorry enough. But she would be.

Janna had been such an idiot. She knew something like this was bound to happen. She could have
prevented it, back in Dis. Take Sam’s deal, have her and Tom walk away, forgetting they ever even knew who Star was. Tom would still have an arm then. Sam had said that she would kill Star if Janna accepted that deal. She should have just taken it!

Well, that last part could still be fixed...

The witch extended the snake tattoo finger towards Star, and streams of blue lightning arched out of her hand towards the princess’ body. They crackled through the air, only to be stopped mid air as the mewman turned around and raised yet another one of her pink glitter shields.

“What the hell, Janna!” Star yelled. She seemed angry. Angry at her for using magic against her. The goddamn barefaced hypocrite.

Sam had said he would kill Star. But, Janna realized, he did kill Star. It was just that the devil had never intended it to be permanent. Well, now, she had other plans.

The witch closed her hand into a fist and, instead of lightning, a spear made of black ichor appeared in mid air and flung itself towards the princess’ shield. It crashed through it like a cannonball through a glass window. Star simply danced out of the way behind it, leaving Tom’s convulsing body down on the floor.

Now, Janna wasn’t crazy, her attack missed the demon by a wide margin, whether the other girl was there or not. She wanted to help Tom, to protect him, and she knew just how to do that.

“Janna, please, calm down,” Star pleaded, “What are you doing?”

“Saving us all from the Dark Queen Ascending!”

With a wave of her hand, a storm of azure arrows fell like hail on the mewman princess. But Star simply waved her wand, muttered one of her dumb spells, and Janna’s magic attack was wasted on turning an incoming pod (or whatever!) of narwhals into pincushions. The creatures even reacted to it, crying as if they were actually hurt, actually alive. But it was all a charade, of course, mere constructs of Star’s magic. Just one more way for Star to mock her. The princess had near limitless reserves of crude childish summons at her disposal, while Janna paid for every magic arrow with a sliver of her own immortal soul.

She tried to think whether she knew how to make Sam’s magic suffocate the damn bug to death, to remove the air from her lungs, like he had done during their fight. Realizing that she couldn’t do that, she opted for the next best thing. Thick ropes of translucent phantasmal darkness exploded out of her fingers, tying themselves around the mewman’s wrists, ankles, and most importantly, her neck. Janna noticed that the tattoo was up to her own wrist. She didn’t care. The shadow ribbons began to constrict. They had no heads, but they hissed like snakes.

“Ky-aah!” Marco shouted, as he cut the spectral ropes with a well placed karate chop. His body still glowed white, and the witch realized he could touch the immaterial, her own constricting spell included. “Janna, that’s enough! Look, I know you are in shock, but you need to back the hell off!”

“Make me.”

She twisted her hand and let the snake tattoo advance a few hundredths of an inch more. The intangible ribbons swiped left. They passed right through Star, and through the silver stairs. But Marco could touch ghosts, and so, the ribbons could touch him. They pushed him away. All the way away.

Janna threw him out of the floating staircase, and down into the pits of hell. He was almost as
much to blame as Star was. He was the reason for the princess’ dumb wish, the inciting cause behind that monster.

“Marco!?” Star cried, horrified, realizing what she had just lost. It was music to the witch’s ears. What followed that... wasn’t.

“GLOWING DARKNESS HELLBLAST!”

Janna raised her arm in front of her. A wall of something she could only think of as a piece of firmament rose between herself and the mewman’s deadly attack. It was a shadowy fog-like substance, filled with a billion dots of blue light. Star’s spell didn’t so much break against the barrier, as it faded into its deceptive depths: light-years of distance held within the span of a few feet. It was power like the human girl could before barely have imagined possible.

The troublemaker looked at her arm. She noticed with charing that she was elbow-deep in snake tattoo now. She had clearly overdone it with that last one.

The magic wall faded not a second later but, fortunately, by then, Star was no longer focusing her spell on her.

The princess eyes were closed. Soon after, they opened up with a blinding violet glow exploding out of them, dismissing any semblance of human expression from her face. From the sides of her torso, two extra pairs of arms were quickly emerging. Behind her, six black and golden wings had begun to unfurl.

The witch knew that, even after her bargain, she could never win against a transformed Star. It was now or never!

Janna pushed back with her own wings, flying towards the mewman as fast as she could. She had to struggle to keep balance on her broken left wing. She closed her hand, THE hand, the snake tattoo hand, around Star’s throat. She constricted her windpipe, pushing her thumb against the front of her neck, turning it into a piercing lance of force at the cost of even more of her soul. As she did so, she kept flying forward with the force of her own assault. They flew up one full flight of stairs, then the other. She was headed for the door out of hell, and she was taking the princess with her. Out of hell, and away from Tom.

The witch felt five strong arms grab hold of her, trying to push her away. She saw a glowing violet ball of fire, a living star, pressed up against her chest. The royal wand, held by the princess’ remaining sixth hand, was powering up for something. Janna asked Sam and all his hells for the strength to kill Star before she could cast another spell.

At that moment, they crossed the threshold of the portal, leaving the underworld behind.

----

Marco fell.

He fell through the empty air. As soon as his body was more than an arm length or two away from the silver staircase, the entire thing seemed to vanish into thin air: Star, Janna, Jackie, everyone gone. The portal was gone too. Just an empty door floating in the sky where the base of the stairs had been, one moment far below him, the next one far above.

He fell towards the dark waves below. If the other hells were any indication, touching the water would either dissolve him, freeze him to dead, or just alert the deep sea predators to come eat his body alive. And, the worst thing was, he hadn’t even been able to help Star. He hadn’t been able to
talk any sense into Janna. He had seen how mad his old childhood friend was, and how beyond fed up Star was with her in return. One of them was going to murder the other.

He hoped it was Star who did it. He felt horrible to even admit that to himself. But, after all, he could imagine a world without Janna. He couldn’t imagine a world without Star.

The thing was, even if she won, Star would be devastated. She would feel terrible about killing her former friend. Besides, well, Marco was going to be dead soon too, right? That was probably not going to be a picnic for his best friend either. Fuck! He had failed her. Hadn’t he? Not just failed to stop her fight with Janna, but he would fail to be there for her, even after all the times he swore to never leave her.

‘Jackie, take care of Star for me, ok? She is going to need you. Sorry to both of you, for being such an…’ he thought, as he readied himself for the crash.

“Idiot!” shouted a voice above him. Marco opened his eyes to see a purple form falling behind him. No, not falling, diving down, head first, with his arms, no, with an arm, pressed against his side. “Marco, I said: ‘look up and hold on, you idiot’!”

Marco reacted as swiftly as he could under the circumstances, and reached for Tom’s body in mid air. He literally scrambled towards him, and, almost by miracle, managed to hug his leg before the demon fell past him.

“What the hell, Tom! She threw you too!?” Marco shouted.


The Lucitor Prince turned around in mid air somehow, and pointed his remaining hand, the left one, down towards the water below.

“Don’t fucking... ugh... dare let go,” forced the demon.

A blast of fire exploded out of his palm, like the exhaust of a rocket. Marco was well clear of the blast itself, but the proximity heat alone felt like it would melt his skin. He still held on to Tom’s leg. Even third degree burns would be better than certain death.


“My... fucking... arm... is gone,” Tom’s eyes glowed bright like brazes. “I am in literally mind shattering amounts of pain right now, Marco! Argh! So... don’t ask any more fucking questions, ok!”

Marco, quite reasonably, shut up.

“Wait, where are the... ugh... damn stairs?” the demon prince asked, between pants and grunts.

“They are gone,” Marco pointed out. “They are only there if you go through the doors, and if you fly too far away from them, they vanish. You were the one who explained that to us, remember?”

“What part of mind shattering pain is not clear to you?!” Tom protested. “Fuck those stairs with the Astray One’s Five Pricks!”

Swearing aside, the Lucitor prince angled his hand to push them towards the other side of the hovering door. With some difficulty, which Marco imagined was due to navigating using a single
blast for thrust, the demon managed to drag both of their bodies through the floating black gates. They crashed against the solid cold metal of the staircase, among a bunch of random muffins and cupcakes.

“Crap! I... ugh... I thought I would only have to fly you all the way up...” Tom looked up at the stairs. He stumbled, barely able to walk after all that, let alone climb ten thousand stairs. “We don’t have time for this! We need to stop them.”

“I know,” replied Marco. He moved his hands as fast as he could, rushing through the words of the Fierceness Ritual.

“What are you doing!? Just run, I’ll... arghhh! ... I’ll try to keep up...” the demon yelled.

“No, Tom,” Marco said, kneeling down. “My turn. Get on my back. It will be faster this way.”

Under normal circumstances, Tom would have felt quite uncomfortable taking a piggy back ride from Marco. It was just a plain out weird thing to do. Right now, he didn’t care. His mind drifted in and out of consciousness. He had moved past pain, into a general state of numbness. But he couldn’t rest, not until they got to Star and Janna. He tried to slap himself awake... then realized he no longer had the hand he had tried to use.

“Tom, sorry for the stupid question...” Marco spoke, as he ran up, carrying the demon, without slowing down one bit. “...but why did you jump after me rather than try to calm down Janna?”

“I... I didn’t think... I just jumped...” he answered truthfully.

Marco groaned. He seemed about to say something, but held back. Tom recognized the signs of someone trying to control his own temper, by focusing their attention on some other mental task. Was Marco counting backwards?

The demon prince had been worried about Janna first, of course, and jumped in front of the deflected spell without thinking. Then, in his feverish state of agony, he had seen Marco fall, and had rushed after him as well. It was only half-way through falling that he processed what had happened and realized that they needed to get back up there as soon as possible, before either Star or Janna did something truly irreversible.

Then again, if he hadn’t jumped right when he did, Marco would have probably fallen to his doom. The carnivorous microbes of the hellish sea below would have turned him to bones in seconds. Not that the boy needed to know any of that now.

“Tom...” Marco said, quietly. “...thank you.”

“Yeah, um, I... I guess I am kind of a hero now,” reasoned Tom, half out-of-it.

Marco paused for a moment. Then, somewhat hesitantly, he said, “Yes. Yes you are, Tom.”

“You were a big hero for sixteen years, weren’t you?” he pressed. Not sure why he was thinking about that now. Or why they were talking. To keep awake, he guessed.

There were still over three quarters of the stairs to go.

“I guess...” Marco responded.
“Does it always suck this much?” Tom asked.

There was a very long pause after that.

“Yeah... I think it does. I don’t remember all of it but, from what I have seen, I’d say it sucks alright,” Marco admitted, frustrated. “You still got a particularly shitty deal today, though, sorry... Hey, how about, once we reach them, you get in front of one of Janna’s spells, and I catch the one from Star? That way we can compare notes.”

It was a joke. It was also possibly their best actual plan to stop a fight between those two.

“Deal.”

----

Jackie woke up alone.

The left side of her face hurt particularly badly. Tentatively, she ran a finger over the burned skin. Ouch. It stung, a lot. She resolved to leave it alone for the time being. She had bruised her arm and legs against the stairs too. Nothing broken, it seemed, though.

Alright, never mind that just now. She scrambled for the glass sword, feeling so much safer with the hilt in her hand. It all was quiet. She noticed the silence before she even registered the view: empty stairs.

What had happened? Had they won? Then, why would they leave her here?

She looked around, no sign of anyone else, burned metal, a pool of crimson blood. Blood? The green ghost creature didn’t bleed. But this didn’t look like human blood either. Star? Tom?

Had they lost? Oh god, they had lost! But then, why would the creature leave her alive? That also made no sense!

Well, it was supposedly opposed to killing her, as well as Star and Marco, even if they were never sure how far that preference truly went. But, even so, why would it take the other two away and not her? No, it still didn’t add up...

And, if it had killed any of them, there would be bodies, wouldn’t there? Jackie thought she should have felt like puking at the mere thought of her friends, the people she loved, being dead, but she didn’t. It was like her mind was too focused on trying to reconstruct the events to let herself be distracted by the horror, at least not yet.

She looked down through the edge of the staircase. True, the bodies could have been disposed that way. Either way, there was nothing she could see from up here but the dark unsettlingly calm ocean below.

She looked back to the stairs they had climbed. No. There was no reason for them to go back, not even when fleeing. If they had needed to escape, then Star would have surely summoned something that flew. And, well, she would have taken her too, she hoped. Star... Marco... where were they? None of the options made sense!

Then Jackie looked up, to the portal at the end of the stairs, to the swirling maelstrom of orange and gold. It was the path that seemed most reasonable. She didn’t know why she had been left behind but, if they were alive, then that was the more logical path for Marco and the rest to follow. Either way, since she couldn’t fly, well, it was literally her only way off these stairs...
Star had to be fine, Janna too, they had to. Even if they were really fighting to the death, Star would be alright. She had survived the fight with Sam in the end, there was no way Janna could... The thought alone made Marco sick in his stomach. If she had so much as hurt Star, Marco was going to murder that fucking bitch!

Wait, no! Crap! That was the stupid ritual talking. He needed the strength to carry Tom, to run up faster, to reach Star and Jackie and Janna, but he needed to keep calm too. Not a good idea to add yet another explosive temper to that mix. He was going up there to stop the fighting, not join it. He counted down from twenty.

He was in control of the ritual’s side-effects, not the other way around. As long as he remembered his mind was being affected, and focused on fighting those instincts back, he would be ok. It wasn’t another personality, not some sort of cliched dark side, nor mind control. It was like, well, like his aggression was on a fucking hair trigger. But he just needed to remind himself that Star would be alright, that, as long as he didn’t mess up this time, all would be fine.

Star was tough, really really tough, there was no way anything too bad would happen to her, not once the emerald ghosts were gone. Janna would be ok, too. Star wouldn’t really kill her, would she? Maybe she would just knock her out, or do her time freeze thing and restrain her? Maybe break a few of her bones, just to be sure... no, wait, that was the ritual again. Marco shouldn’t be thinking along those lines, and neither would the mewman.

Sure, Star had become a lot quicker to resort to lethal magics since her mom died. But, still, she wouldn’t use those on a friend, even an estranged one, no matter what the troublemaker did. Would she?

Then again, if she didn’t, wasn’t there a chance that Star herself might get hurt because of it? After all, if Janna had some of Sam’s power, but Star couldn’t fight her as freely as she fought Sam... Maybe it would actually be better if Star did let go. She could smash a damn mountain on the other girl or have a dragon eat her, see if that taught her not to throw Marco to his death! Maybe he ought to teach her that lesson! Ugh. Stupid ritual.

It wasn’t just the ritual, though. The worry was driving Marco insane. It didn’t help that this stairs seemed to go on forever, and that Tom had just passed out on his back. He couldn’t blame the demon, of course. It was a testament to his willpower that he hadn’t lost consciousness the moment the spell hit him. An arm. God. Marco had been cracking jokes about it for the sake of his friend, but he couldn’t even begin to imagine what Tom was going through.

And he didn’t have the time to imagine. There were still over one third of the stairs to go. He needed to channel all his magical strength, all his magical fury, into climbing those goddamned stairs.

“Star!!” he growled, uselessly. He knew he was still too far away to be heard.

Something was happening to the sky. Instead of the feeble gray light that flowed over the place when they first arrived, it seemed to take on a bright reddish color. Maybe a sort of infernal dawn?

No, it was still dark outside, it was only brighter in relative terms. Maybe they had been in the underworld for long enough to forget, but he thought he knew what the sun looked like, and this wasn’t it. But, then, Marco realized that it was not just reddish: it was red. Blood red, in fact.

He looked up to see the round crimson form of the Blood Moon above the sky. He remembered
Tom’s words earlier that day: ‘the Blood Moon appears to the lovers when one of them is in danger’.

He had to hurry. He had to reach Star.

----

Jackie stood in front of the portal, wondering if she should step through the opaque swirling brightness. She guessed it was worth a try. At least to peek at the other side and double back if the others weren’t there.

Her left cheek stung so much. She was seeing red, all around her. Wait, that wasn’t from the pain or anything. Things were literally red, or at least, illuminated by a red light.

She looked up.

The Blood Moon.

Why? How?

What was it trying to tell her? To go forward, or to stay back?

Well, she had been standing here for a while now, and waiting had never much been her style. She adjusted the nacre scabbard on her belt and held the glass rapier at the ready. She glanced one last time at the red celestial body in the hellish sky, and took one decisive step forward.

‘Marco, Star, I am coming after you, alright? Please be ok…’

At that moment, Jackie crossed the threshold of the portal, leaving the underworld behind.

----

Marco ran up the stairs as fast as he could, holding onto Tom’s unconscious body behind him, making sure he remained strapped to his back. He wasn’t thinking. He wasn’t planning. Even the fury of the ritual was not there anymore, subsumed by his dread of what he might find at the end of his desperate climb.

The silver stairs reflected the glowing red disc of the Blood Moon. An urgent warning for him to hurry up.

Then, suddenly, no more than a dozen flights away from his goal, it went away. A moribund grayness replaced it, as the normal light of the hellish dimension reasserted itself. Marco looked up and saw no moon in the empty sky.

He ran, if such a thing was possible, faster than he had been running before. He ran as if his life depended on it. Faster, even. Faster, because it was not really his life, after all, but Star’s and Jackie’s, and those were infinitely more precious to him.

Almost there, he was almost there, he was... there.

Marco turned around and saw, three flights up, the orange and gold swirling portal. He didn’t stop then. One flight of stairs later, he saw the pool of Tom’s blood. What he didn’t see, however, was Star, or Jackie, or even Janna.

Tick. Tock.
He stopped there, confused.

Tick. Tock.

If they weren’t here, that either meant they had also fallen down, or, more likely, they had gone through the vortex.

Tick. Tock.

Realization dawned on him like a sledgehammer. He raced towards the portal, not wasting a single additional second. But it was too late. Way too late.

Time in Hekapoo’s dimension didn’t flow the same way as it did on Earth or, presumably, in hell. Marco understood what that meant better than most people. He had once spent sixteen years there, while for Star, outside, only eight minutes had passed.

So, how long ago had the others gone through the portal? And, how long had it taken for Marco and Tom to climb back up the stairs? Half an hour? Forty-five minutes? A full hour? More?

The blood drained from Marco’s face as he ran up the remaining two flights of stairs, not daring to pause even to breathe. He had to see it. He had to know. But, even if he went into the portal now, what difference did it make?

He flung himself through the whirlpool of golden and orange flames. Not a step, but a desperate leap.

At that moment, and not earlier, Marco crossed the threshold of the portal, leaving the underworld behind.

He landed on a mound of hard dry soil, his powerful muscular legs cushioning the fall. Large empty lungs drew air all at once into his toned chest. Sharp hunter eyes surveyed his surroundings. Old honed reflexes already stood prepared for an ambush.

On this end, there was no sign of the portal. All around him, instead, was a circle of rune-etched obsidian black monoliths and, beyond those, a forest of foreboding incredibly tall gray trees. They looked as if made of limestone, rather than living wood. Soot drizzled slowly but endlessly from an overcast morning sky.

He lowered Tom’s sleeping body to the ground, carefully. The ritual’s effect was gone, but it didn’t matter. In his adult body, Marco was more than capable of carrying the demon boy’s lanky form.

It was the same body Marco had when he was last here, the body he honed over sixteen years of chasing Hekapoo. Sixteen years of terror, and death, and war, and monsters; of countless terrible acts done to and by him. It was the body of that other Marco, the one in his dreams and hazy memories. It was Marco of Zonst, and Averx, and whatever the other place was.

Any other time, he would have been overjoyed to have this body back, if nothing else, to once again feel as powerful as he remembered feeling by the time he finished his scissors quest. But, right now, he couldn’t muster the energy to care. Right now, he didn’t feel powerful at all. Right now, he could only kneel down and sob.

There was no sign of Star, or Jackie, or Janna. But Marco hadn’t expected there to be.

He was too late. Way way too late. Years too late. Decades too late.
If they had crossed the portal even two seconds ago, they could be as far as a month’s march away from here by now.

If they had crossed between five and ten minutes before Marco reached the end of the stairs, then they would have lived through the same sixteen-years-long horror show that Marco had endured while chasing after Hekapoo, give or take five years or so.

And, if they had crossed the portal soon after he fell... then Star... and Jackie...

They were likely already long dead from old age.

----

END of Part III

Chapter End Notes

Well, kids, I think you all know the lyrics so... sing with me:

*I think Earth is a pretty gre-at place... ;)*

Fun fact: This chapter contains more instances of the word "fuck" and its variations than any of the ones with actual sex scenes...

This concludes (the revised) Part III.

Part IV will start with **Chapter 32: The Once and Future Me**, which should be up and ready before or around Jan 1, 2019.

Love,

APW
Chapter Summary

In which heroes are lost, friends are missing, and we find familiar lands under unfamiliar heavens.

Chapter Notes

We are back, and, for better or worse, it’s a long chapter!

**Warning**: This chapter, and the rest of part IV, might contain spoilers for already published chapters of *A Habit Hard to Break* by Akeara4 and Grade_A_Sexual (technically, I already dropped one big unmarked spoiler with Kar, sorry about that one!). If you plan to read that fic at all (and you should!) and haven’t yet, I strongly recommend catching up to it before continuing IStASE.

That said, I try to not use stuff from recent Habit chapters at the time of writing, so you don’t need to be fully caught up, and it is still intended that this should be readable without reading that other fic, as I try to provide enough background for the things in the flashbacks that are relevant to this story.

At the same time, I am changing things up here. Remember, the tag is “Habit Mythos” not “Habitverse”. Expect a lot of things in IStASE’s Marco’s backstory and the worldbuilding of Hekapoo’s domain to break with Habit’s canon even as I shamelessly steal from the same. This will often be just because I actually don’t know any better, despite Grade’s and Akeara4’s best efforts to explain the lore to me, and because Habit is still being written. But, also, sometimes, it’s very much intentional ;)

Without further ado...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Part IV: A Wound Upon the Heavens**

**Chapter 32: The Once and Future Me**

“You know this isn’t exactly a council-sanctioned expedition, right? You didn’t have to come along,” the young newly-minted leader reasoned, pushing aside a leafy branch, only to reveal twenty more like it just ahead. He sighed. Perhaps, if they both climbed just a bit higher up the tall tree, they would eventually be able to see farther away than their own noses.

“I am well aware, **Guildmaster** Marco,” the short-haired soldier retorted. She directed an exasperated glare his way, belying the formal address. Somewhere below the two of them, back on the forest floor, a toad chose that moment to interject into their conversation with a brief croak. “I
am also well aware that you have gotten us completely lost, again. I’d tell you how many times it has been to date but, frankly, I lost track after the first twelve or so…”

Marco chuckled in response to that. “Aw, come on, Ally, we are not actually lost.”

A few years ago, when he had first been here, though? Now, that had been different! Back then he really had been lost. Lost, and hungry, and confused, and absolutely in over his head.

This strange forest had been the first place he had ended up in after following Hekapoo through the portal and, if he hadn’t had the luck to meet Toza back then, he would have surely died in it. Even with the merchant’s help, he had spent his first few months in this dimension fighting each day just to stay alive in a hostile and unfamiliar environment, one that included giant bear monsters, two headed cats, poisonous rivers, and aggressive ostrich-like creatures that turned to stone at night!

Even though he had ostensibly been chasing Hekapoo right from the beginning, he had to admit that, for the first dozen weeks or so, simply surviving had been challenge enough. Compared to that, and compared to the business of running a whole province of the fractious and fragile alliance that was Qur Don, this one was almost a leisure trip.

“Oh, really? We aren’t lost? Then, please, Guildmaster, enlighten me, which way is Zonst from here?” Allion retorted.

She crossed her arms, using only her legs to hold onto the thick tree branch they both were sitting on. She made it look so effortless. Allion grinned, knowingly, at the way in which Marco’s hands reflexively clung even more strongly to the smooth pale bark.

The young guildmaster looked around, at the rows upon rows of thick Katato trees stretching in every direction, at the black overcast sky above, visible through the high canopy, at the thick dark green undergrowth below. Even if his knowledge of the place were fresh in his mind - which, after years living in Zonst, was hardly something he could count on - there was no way that he would be able to find out their location from such generic surroundings. He couldn’t even make out any moss around the base of the trees, to tell north from south.

“Fine, Ally, I don’t know that,” he admitted. “But I can think of at least two ways to find out, if we need to.”

“Really? Name them, then,” she ordered her purported superior, with transparent skepticism.

Marco smiled at her request. He had lived amongst these wilds for over half a year, after all. By the end of that time, he had learned to find beauty and wonder among the dense trees and giant sunflowers, and all the many living creatures which inhabited the woods. The forest was full of life, and he had learned to use that life to his advantage. Eventually, it had been that same life which had allowed the boy to catch his first Hekapoo clone. Well, that and a bear trap, but that was a story for another time.

At any rate, maybe he had, for once, something to teach Allion about this world of theirs.

“There is a nectar in this forest which…” he begun, confidently.

“…allows you to see through the eyes of random small critters and shit,” she completed the sentence for him, turning his eager smile into a familiar frown. “Marco, even kids know about that! It doesn’t actually help you orient yourself at night, at all, because not a single animal that eats the stuff is a nocturnal bird. So, good luck getting directions from an insomniac merwiff or whatever! …Next?”
More than a bit peeved that his hard-won ‘secret lore’ had turned out to be utterly unsurprising to the more experienced soldier, Marco was forced to fall back onto the stuff she herself had taught him. “Uh, well… we can always just use the Finding Ritual!” he offered.

“Sure, and then, when the price is due, maybe you will forget that they made you Guildmaster, and I can take over instead,” she joked, completely deadpan.

Ok, fine, finding the way home was not worth losing the random memory that the ritual took from you in exchange.

That said, well, that particular example wouldn’t really be all that bad. Would it?

“You can take over right now!” he offered, only half in jest. “In fact, I sort of wish you had stayed back to take care of things back in Zonst. Without you there, I don’t even want to think about the amount of crap that will be sitting at my desk when we get back.”

“Without me here, you might not make it back,” she stated, matter-of-factly.

“You wish!” Marco laughed.

Despite present evidence to the contrary, he really wasn’t as hopeless as Allion liked to pretend he was. After all, he had tracked another four Hekapoo clones since he became Guildmaster, three of those alone, and this one was even in familiar territory for him, making her hopefully easier to hunt. Still, he was happy he didn’t have to do it all alone this time around.

“Honestly, Ally, I am glad you are here. There is no one I trust more than you to have my back…” he admitted, looking directly into her eyes, if only for a brief moment.

A hooting sound in the distance punctuated the pause that followed.

Allion seemed to ponder his words for a moment. “Marco, you are an idiot. You know that, right?”

“So you keep saying.” He grinned. “Are you saying I shouldn’t trust you?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I am saying,” she agreed, suddenly looking very serious. “Not me, not anyone. When you trust someone to have your back, you are just giving them an easy target to stab. More so now that they all have something to gain from doing just that, Guildmaster.”

The thing was, she wasn’t wrong. Being guildmaster was an excellent way to put a bounty on your own head. Just ask the Hekapoo clone from whom he himself had gotten the title in the first place! Not that he had snuffed out her candle in order to get her title, of course. That had been sort of an unwanted side effect for him more than anything else. He had never planned on becoming Guildmaster of Zonst, not that he would ever be able to convince Allion of that…

So, yeah, she wasn’t wrong. Yet, at the same time, she was wrong, though. Marco just couldn’t accept the girl’s bleak outlook towards other people’s intentions. Hekapoo’s dimension was indeed a ruthless unforgiving place but, even here, Marco couldn’t imagine living all his life without ever fully trusting anyone. After all, if nothing else, the two of them had one another.

Marco turned around, slowly, careful not to fall from the tree, until he was facing Allion. He looked into her eyes and smiled.

“All, close your eyes.”

“What for?” she asked, suspicious. Behind her, the human saw a small mouse scurry around on a
smaller branch.

“Ally, that’s an order,” Marco pressed.

She sighed, resigned, and closed her eyes.

Marco drew closer. He held a hand up towards the back of her head. If he wanted, he could have pushed her down, head first, into the ground. The fall would almost certainly end up snapping her neck. From this high up, it would likely break her bones as well. He knew that, if the thought could even occur to him, then Allion had certainly also thought of it. Instead, he pulled her towards him, and kissed her deeply, running his hand through her short hair.

When they finally separated, he was grinning at her. “See, Ally? You trusted me, and it turned out ok.”

She smiled back, lovingly, “No, I didn’t.”

Marco looked down to see a throwing knife held a few inches away from his left flank, right under where he had lifted his own arm to hold his lover’s head.

He sighed. Apparently, Allion refused to learn the heartwarming lesson he had tried to teach her. Well, she hadn’t said no to the kiss either, so there was that.

The girl chuckled, then looked up.

“By the way, Marco,” she added, pointing out with her left hand. “Zonst is that way.”

“How do you know?”

“The sky just cleared out, dumbass. I can see the stars.”

----

The stars were all wrong.

It was the first thing Marco noticed as he woke up in the middle of the night. The dark clouds of the day before had cleared out, and with them, the falling black soot and ash had gone away as well. He looked up, through the thick stone roots of the petrified Katato tree under which they had slept. His eyes drawn towards that broken unfamiliar sky.

He had just dreamed of this place. About how it had looked before, back when he had been chasing Hekapoo’s clones all over her domain for sixteen years straight. The particular memory had been from one of the last times he had revisited these woods during that whole ordeal. Back then, at a scale of only half a decade or so, the forest had seemed fixed, immutable, eternal. Now, everything was different, even the sky.

Still, it was undeniably the same place. He recognized the general shape and height of the Katato trees, even without any leaves growing on them, even without any of the usual sounds of the forest, even with everything turned grey. It felt so strange to be back here, back to square one. He looked down at his calloused adult hands. No… not exactly square one.

He had also dreamed of Allion. Marco sighed, remembering what had happened some time after that kiss. He remembered her attempt on his life, and her own death at Scarion’s hands. She had, indeed, stabbed him on the back for his title, and yet, there had been a lot more to it than just that.
He had not revisited those parts yet in his dreams, and he hoped he wouldn’t have to. Still, he could recall them. Maybe because he had already remembered them inside of other dreams? Dreams that took place after he left Qur Don. Or, maybe, some of the memories were now coming back to him even without having to dream about them, now that he was back here. He wasn’t sure.

Allion. He wondered why he had dreamed of her. After all, presumably he had many more memories of this place, memories that didn’t involve her. It’s not like he could quite recall what she had meant to him, not entirely. There were still so many memories from those sixteen years he had not yet gotten back.

At most, he could recall only a few isolated moments out of what was supposedly a years-long relationship. But, in what memories he did have - from his dreams, and from the memories within his dreams - he had been in love, and then he had lost her, and then she had died.

The human forced himself away from that train of thought, from the implications of how that memory might be related to his present situation.

Marco hadn’t wanted to waste a single second in finding Star and Jackie, but Tom had been out cold ever since they crossed through the portal, and he himself had been exhausted as well. The added boost of the Fierceness Ritual had dissipated the moment they crossed the threshold into this world, and it had taken all of Marco’s remaining strength, even in his more athletic adult body, to carry the demon prince this far. There had simply been no point in marching, through an ash storm, dragging an unconscious Tom around, until Marco himself fainted from the exertion.

Besides, if he was right, he had already wasted… years? Yeah, let’s go with ‘years’. Then, what difference could a few hours more of rest make after that?

It had seemed unwise to sleep in the open, and not just because of the falling soot. The Katato Forest had never been exactly a safe route, even back when trade caravans regularly made the journey through it between Mirria and Qur Don. Now? Marco didn’t know. From the moment they first arrived, he had noticed something decidedly eerie about the place. There were no sounds, for one. Not a single insect buzzing or bird chirping or leaf rustling, nothing besides the wind itself in his ears. There had been a pretty strong breeze, but it didn’t manage to move the bare branches of any of the gray trees.

The reason had become all too clear to him once he had gotten close enough to one of the ashen trunks: they had all been turned into stone. Actual stone. They were fossilized where they stood, looking and feeling like pale harsh limestone. It was as if the entire forest were a cemetery, and the trees had all become tombstones.

No, not even that. Grass grew well in cemeteries, feeding on the bodies buried below. Here the ground was barren, not a green blade to be found. There was nothing alive at all, as far as the eye could see.

The entire picture caused Marco’s hairs to stand on end. Yet, even so, the most unsettling thing was the sky.

There were barely any clouds now, and it was a new moon night, so the stars shone brightly in the otherwise empty heavens. Marco had spent many years in Hekapoo’s domain, and had been revisiting the place in dreams every night in the last few days, and yet he couldn’t recognize a single familiar constellation, nor a single known star.

Instead, there was this stream of unfamiliar faintly glowing red points, somewhat like the Milky Way as seen from Earth, on a secluded enough camping spot, but entirely made of red stars. In the
middle of the path of crimson, was a bright violet dot. Far away, all alone on the other side of the
heavenly vault, a blue star, also abnormally bright, barely rose over the horizon. The rest was a
void black tapestry, adorned only by a few scattered red dots that seemed to have separated from
the central stream. It looked as if someone had cut a bloody gash through the sky. A bleeding
wound upon the heavens.

Marco wondered how much time would have passed, since he was last here, for all to have
changed so much, for trees to petrify and familiar constellations to shift out of view. He tried to do
the math in his head: sixteen years in eight minutes, roughly one and one fourth centuries in an
hour, three millennia in a day, and he had been gone for... he stopped. Not only did the numbers
quickly become meaninglessly large, but it was just too easy to think back to the other calculation,
the one that truly terrified him. He refused to work out just how much time could have potentially
passed in here since he lost sight of Star and Jackie, right on the other side of the gateway.

Or, rather, he had already worked it out, he just refused to acknowledge the figure.

Marco looked at Tom’s resting body, tossing and turning uncomfortably, rolling over his missing
arm. It might not have been a deep catatonic sleep anymore, but Marco doubted the demon would
be ready to walk if he woke him up now.

Instead, the boy in a warrior’s body began carefully climbing up the petrified tree. It was even
harder than doing the same thing with a living tree, since he couldn’t dig into the bark, and, in fact,
if he wasn’t careful, the sharp edges of the rocky surface could easily dig into him instead.
Nonetheless, his older self had done this sort of thing before, many many times, and, while Marco
did not yet have most of his conscious memories back, muscle memory seemed to be another
matter entirely. The human quickly found himself shocked by the force and dexterity now
available to him inside those powerful limbs.

Soon, he was sitting on one of the tallest branches of the tree, high above most of the nearby
petrified woods. He looked around, trying to survey his position. His heart sank as his eyes caught
in the bleak sight.

The entire forest was exactly the same as the small area he had dragged Tom through earlier that
day: gray calcified tree after gray calcified tree, leafless husks as far as the eye could see. A
familiar river bend, which he remembered from his days chasing Hekapoo’s clone through the
vibrant woods, was now a dried up scar on the earth. There were patches of barren tree-less land
that the human was pretty sure should have been covered in giant sunflowers instead. Worse, he
still could see absolutely no sign of activity, human or animal, in the formerly vibrant woods.
Marco’s gut grumbled, discovering how hungry it felt just as the human realized how much of a
challenge finding food in this wasteland might just turn out to be.

Well, there was always the Finding Ritual. He mentally checked that he remembered the pattern
for ‘food’ (‘sustenance’, technically) in Riradesh. It would be his last resort, though. There were
usually better ways to scavenge for food than to burn up your memories in the process. But, well, if
it came to the choice between that and starvation...

Wait! The Finding Ritual! That was it! How didn’t he think of it sooner!? Forget food. He should
be using it to find Star and Jackie!

He began the mantra of twelve words and the sequence of gestures immediately. He was halfway
through the spell before he realized that, in his excitement, he had forgotten that he didn’t actually
know how to name Star or Jackie in Riradesh.

Still, even as he exhaled the glowing golden light upon his palm, he thought of an idea. With his
finger, he drew in mid air a single glyph, representing the concept of an actual star. It was unlike the five or six pointed ‘star’ drawings often used on Earth, but rather a simple circle, representing a heavenly object, which then flowed at the top into a three-pronged crown of light. The stroke then crossed back the circle in a vertical line, ending in a second crown of light, facing down towards the earth. He focused, as hard as he could, on the memories of his girlfriend and best friend.

The glowing sigil folded unto itself, turning into a sphere of bright golden light. Marco’s heart jumped up with excitement for a moment. It was, quite possibly, the first true instant of hope he had experienced in the last twelve hours. It meant Star was still alive, and that he had a way to find her!

However, his incipient excitement was quickly brought low, as he saw the bright sphere of light fly up, towards the middle of the red stream of actual stars, showing him the shimmering violet body in the middle. It was, indeed, the brightest star in that strange firmament, but it was not the guiding Star that Marco had sought to find.

He sighed, wondering what memory he had squandered in such a foolish attempt. If he had known the Riradesh word for ‘butterfly’, would drawing both have given him different results?

How about just scribbling ‘Star Butterfly’ in English, or, for that matter, ‘Jackie Lynn Thomas’? He had always used Hekapoo’s Riradesh name to locate her, in the memories he had gotten back. But, maybe, that was just because that other Marco, the one who had lived for sixteen years in this place, already thought in that strange language more than he did in his own native tongue.

Maybe the ritual wouldn’t really care what language Marco used to name that which he sought. The words of the ritual itself, after all, were not Riradesh, but something older and deeper than that. He breathed in, repeated the incantation in the ancient tongue, saw his finger flare up with light, and began writing ‘Star Butterfly’ into the air, in cursive English.

Marco was careful not to break the single flowing line as he wrote. Riradesh had no spaces between characters, or even words or sentences. Each glyph just flowed into each other until the full meaning had been written. Depending on context, a new separate stroke meant something like a new paragraph, or even a whole new chapter. He wasn’t sure what would happen if he tried to break the line of light mid ritual, but it seemed wise to change as few variables as possible. Thus, he wrote cursive, connecting both words by a curved stroke.

Such precaution turned out to be insufficient, however. The light stroke sparkled briefly and then fizzled out as he finished, just as when he had asked it to find Hekapoo after she was gone.

He tried again. Jackie’s name, this time. The answer was the same.

Did that mean that the ritual didn’t understand him? Or that there was no one to be found? A cold hard terror settled heavily inside the human’s gut.

Desperate, headless of the cost, Marco inscribed his own name into the air. He let out a sigh of relief when that failed too. Apparently, whatever power fulfilled the ritual’s pact did not understand - or, more likely, would not acknowledge - English. It was a bummer, sure, but, at this point, it certainly beat the alternative.

Then again, did Star and Jackie even have a name in Riradesh? Did he? Perhaps there were other scripts the ritual would accept, and those could express the humans’ (and mewman’s) names. It seemed unlikely that the ritual had been meant only to find things in this dimension, and not others, and he had never heard of Riradesh being used elsewhere.
The boy sighed. Maybe it was for the best that he couldn’t name Star with the Finding Ritual. After all, what would Marco do, if he tried the ritual, with an unambiguous and correct name, and it still fizzled out on him? If it told him in no uncertain terms that Star was… No, he shouldn’t think like that!

But, well, it had been a long time on this side…

He thought back to Allion. She had been the one to teach him his first rituals. He wondered if she would have known what to do in this situation? If she would even have known where to go?

He could almost hear her, in his mind, ‘Oh, figures you’d be lost once again, Guildmaster’.

But, even if the stars were unfamiliar, without the dense vegetation to obstruct his efforts, he actually did know where he was now. He remembered having thought about it in his dream, to look for the towering mountains in the northwest. Back then, they had been hidden by an ocean of leaves and a ceiling of clouds. He saw them well enough now, though: a black shadowy outline against the gash of red stars. It meant that he knew which way was north, which meant he also knew which way was east.

Qur Don had been to the east. It was probably not there anymore, of course, not a hundred millennia after. But, maybe, that was why he had dreamed that particular dream. In the dream, he and Allion had been trying to figure out in which direction to find Zonst. Why that one, of all his memories, if not to tell him to head back there?

Ok, fine! He had to admit it was a pretty flimsy theory. Beginning with the fact that there was no way his old memories knew where Star and Jackie were (he refused to ask any question other than ‘where?’), or what lied now where Qur Don had once been. But it was also literally the only lead Marco had.

Besides, he had dreamed of this exact forest right after arriving to it. If that was the general rule, then he had the distinct impression that there would be some pretty bad dreams awaiting him if he chose to go west. Marco had seen a lot of bad things in those sixteen years, the last time he was in Hekapoo’s domain: a lot of suffering, a lot of death, a lot of people going missing on him. He wondered, would he be less worried, less scared, if he had all those memories now? …or more?

A pained groan from below interrupted Marco’s increasingly somber thoughts. It was followed a second later by the thud of something impacting against the stone tree.

“Um. W… where am I?” came a drowsy voice. “And why does everything hurt so much… oh… right... arm…” Tom was apparently awake at last.

Marco began making the way down the tree. Hopefully the demon prince would be recovered enough by now for them to cover some real distance this time, marching east.

----

“That’s him, Guildmaster! That’s the brigand who robbed me!” confirmed the merchant.

The trader was a portly man, bald, and reaching perhaps the end of his forties. It was a rather respectable age to reach among these parts. The velvet trim of his robes told Marco that he was doing quite well for himself.

The criminal he identified, by contrast, was young, very young. Not quite a child, but not quite a man either. He was dressed in rags, and looked even smaller the way he stood now: kneeling on the ground with his arms tied behind his back and a rope tethering his right foot to a nearby
wooden pole.

Then again, the one about to pass judgement over this boy was not that much older himself.

Marco of Zonst regarded the lanky dirty youth with a mix of concern and shame. Flanked by two heavily armored soldiers, staring at the kids terrified eyes, he frowned, pondering what to do. Normally, it wouldn’t be his place to decide at all, there were magistrates below him who dealt with this sort of stuff on a daily basis. However, it had been an army patrol that had caught the boy, and military justice was up to whomever was the ranking officer available. Marco was camp commander, not to mention magister militum, in addition to guildmaster. So, he was stuck making the call.

It wasn’t like he couldn’t sympathize with the merchant, either. Trade was the lifeblood of Qur Don, and it was the merchants, like Toza, or like the man now besides him, who provided this invaluable flow. They risked their lives in the wilderness season after season, having to fend bandits and far worse. They crossed the frontier in times of peace, and in times of war, supplying Zonst and all the other provinces.

Marco’s primary title was, after all, Guildmaster. Not duke, not lord, not patrician, and certainly not king or emperor, given the 15 others like him in the council. Not even his military rank came before his leadership of Zonst’s Guild. In Qur Don, through layers and layers of indirection and tradition, through all the politics and all the subordinate honors, through mages and rogues and warriors, it all always came back to the basics: trade. It was what the guilds were guilds of, when it came down to it.

Sure, Zonst’s guild ’members’ proper were notionally something between mercenary companies and the local knightly order. An adventuring company, to hear the tavern minstrels tell it. Maybe they had started that way, Marco didn’t really know. But, the fact of the matter is that guilds ruled Qur Don, and they didn’t rule over a land of adventurers. They ruled over a land of farmers, craftsmen, and traders, and it was primarily the later of these activities that provided the coin that kept the armies functioning, the mages supplied, and the lands safe. Or, well, as safe as possible.

So, yeah, Marco could understand the merchant’s anger, and the damage which thieves inflicted upon the already precarious civilization of this world. At the same time, this particular criminal looked less like the picture of a seasoned outlaw than that of a hungry desperate kid.

And, yet, appearances could be quite deceiving. Marco couldn’t afford to be too soft, to open himself to betrayal and ridicule. This could well be the front put by a budding con artist, or even part of a deeper plot, given how it had somehow ‘lucked’ into falling to his attention.

The Guildmaster of Zonst made a sign with his hands. His movements were practiced and quick, as if giving a benediction. He brought two thumbs and two index fingers together to form a triangle, letting his gaze flow through it towards the youth’s features. He whispered a long incantation, and then there was a quick flash of blue light.

“What is your name?” Marco asked.

“Ezbet,” the accused responded.

“Did you rob this man, Ezbet?” Marco cut right to the chase.

“Yes, Guildmaster,” the boy confessed, instantly.

Shocked, the thief struggled against the bonds behind him, and bit his lower lip, trying to force his
own mouth shut. The Truth Ritual had clearly taken him by surprise, and the look of impotent rage in his eyes was a familiar one already to the recently minted leader. Marco felt conflicted about forcing something like this on the boy, but he continued the interrogation nonetheless.

“Why?” he asked.

The penalty for stealing could range from a beating and a month in jail, through mutilation, all the way to death by decapitation. The motive sometimes made a difference, and sometimes it did not, depending on the judge and the pull the victim might be able to exert. Marco, of course, favored the first of those two legal traditions, and applied it, as much as possible, without distinction of class.

“I was hungry, Guildmaster” the boy explained, anger giving way to resignation as the words continued to flow against his will. The way the ritual worked meant that this was, indeed, the primary motive, albeit not necessarily the only one.

Marco felt a pang on his chest. “Are you from Zonst?” he asked, before he could stop himself.

“Yes, Guildmaster, from one of the southern settlements.” Noticing an opportunity, the youth added, uncompelled by a direct question: “It’s been a cold winter, Guildmaster, and the fishing was bad all year…”

Marco frowned. As their leader, wasn’t it also his fault when these people went without?

“Would you have tried to rob this man, if you hadn’t been hungry?”

“I don’t think so, Guildmaster.” It was the truth, the ritual guaranteed it.

“Guildmaster, surely that doesn’t justify…” the fat man interjected then. Marco silenced him, raising one hand.

“Guards, compensate the accuser for his lost time, he was right to ask for justice,” Marco began, hoping that would placate the merchant. “As for the thief, give him a week worth of army rations, and let him go. If he is hungry, he can come back for more while the cold lasts. If he steals again, whatever the reason, he will be feed in jail until the Spring and put to work if at all possible.”

He already knew Allion would ridicule his proclamation. She would remind him that, in hundreds of cases just like this, Zonst’s lay justice would continue to act the usual way: the right and natural balance of chopped hands and day-long floggings to stop the mass of people from breaking the law.

She would point out that it was indeed a blessing that it was so, lest Marco promise every peasant free rations upon committing their first crime, which, anyways, he then wouldn’t be able to provide in times of scarcity. Those same times, she would note, were when crimes of desperation were most prevalent, after all. She would grant, he knew, that random isolated caprices were a ruler’s prerogative, but caution him not to fool himself into thinking of them as moral acts. If anything, she would argue, the special treatment surely would be the opposite of justice.

Marco knew all that. He knew it was an extravagant and unsustainable mercy, by the standards of this harsh world. But, even so, there was always room for forgiveness, and for kindness.

----

“Are you insane!? She tried to kill Star!” yelled Marco, furious. Despite his aching legs and mounting migraine, he forced himself to rush ahead of Tom, pointedly showing his back to the demon prince.
“Yeah, well, all I am saying, Marco, is that she is probably somewhere in here as well,” the Lucitor Prince responded, striking a note of irritation of his own. “You’ve been going on and on for two days about Star, and Jackie - which, by the way, I obviously agree we should be searching for - but, when I bring up the possibility of trying to find Janna too, suddenly that’s not an option?”

Marco sighed. This conversation would be so much easier, if he wasn’t dying of thirst.

They hadn’t found water since they first arrived to the forest, two nights ago. The Finding Ritual hadn’t helped much, either. It had pointed them south, towards the sea, but saltwater was worse than useless to them now. Marco had tried surveying that direction from atop a tall tree, in case the ritual was showing them something else along the way, but couldn’t spot even a single puddle. The spell seemed to be telling them what they already knew: that there was no fresh water to be found nearby.

So far, Marco had resisted the urge of using the ritual more than once, either, to see if perhaps there was some water source closer to them now. The likely negative answer was not worth the price.

He knew, from his safety training, that a healthy adult human could die of dehydration in as little as four days. What they didn’t usually tell you, though, was how miserable those four days could be, particularly if you were forcing yourself to march on foot for eight to ten hours each. He wasn’t even sure if a normal human adult could do that in this state, or if it was something he had somehow trained this body for, before. If it was, it certainly hadn’t come up yet in any of his dreams.

“Ok, Tom,” he croaked back. “The order is: water, food, Star and Jackie, then Janna. Frankly, I’d feel more comfortable dealing with your crazy witch,” with a ‘b’, Marco thought, but didn’t say, “of an ex after Star is back around. Just in case she tries to kill me, again.”

“Marco, it wasn’t Janna who did this,” Tom observed, quickly catching up to him and showing him the stump where his right arm should have been. “Which, by the way, spoiler: sucks Baphomet’s red hairy balls!”

“That was…” Marco protested.

“An accident? Well, duh, obviously!” Tom quickly agreed. “Marco, I know! I don’t hold it against Star. Believe me, I am as worried about her as you are. But, I am just pointing out that things were pretty chaotic back there, and Janna was in shock. From her perspective, Star almost killed her.”

The demon didn’t seem all that affected by the lack of food or water. He didn’t seem to need it or, if he did, it was on a very different timescale than Marco did. He still often complained about being in pain from the missing limb, as well as from the unhealing burned flesh left in its stead. Yet, after the first full day without food or water, it was Tom who was in the better shape out of the two of them.

“It is moot, Tom,” Marco said, exasperated. His whole body felt hot. “I can only find things I can name, in... um... the local language.”

“Do you know the glyph for ‘snake’, Marco?” Tom retorted. “How about ‘tattoo’?”

He did, actually. Back when he had dreamed of Ennio, he had thought of both words. Perhaps Tom was right, perhaps they did have a way to find Janna. But, then again, did Marco actually want to find her? Star might have been the one who crippled Tom, but it was Janna who had sent the human plummeting to his death, and she had done it deliberately… while trying to strangle Star.
‘Like we did to Toza?’ thought Marco to himself, bitterly.

He wasn’t sure where that even came from. It was not a memory he had lived through again in his dreams (yet), just something he somehow vaguely recalled. Still, that really hadn’t been the same thing!

“So, do you know how to write those, Marco?” insisted the demon, interrupting his train of thought. “How about ‘demon snake tattoo’? In case random snake tattoos are a thing in this world, or something.”

It hurt to talk. It hurt to think.

“Look, Tom, let’s get out of here first.”

----

“Sir, we must cut the bridge!” cried the captain desperately. Marco’s hand remained open, signaling him to hold back.

Not yet. There were still men crossing. His men. Behind them, however, followed an army of Cleradic soldiers, a hundred strong, in fast pursuit across the bridge. That was indeed bad news for the retreating friendly forces still scrambling to reach the other side, but it wasn’t the reason for the captain’s panic. Would that it be so easy. The real problem, of course, was the archers.

Cutting the ropes to separate the pursued from the pursuers was a simple matter in the imagination of many a novice tactician. A strong enough slash with two blades, one on each of the two main supporting lines, and the whole construction would collapse, sending the enemy down to be shredded against the rocks by the broiling currents of the river below.

Except, not only was it not quite so easy to cut ropes thick enough to hold a hanging bridge, but you could, generally speaking, only do so if you had control of the other end of the bridge. The hail of arrows falling on them now meant that Marco and his one remaining companion were at risk of losing said control. If they retreated leaving the bridge intact, they would promptly and inevitably be chased down. If they stood their ground indefinitely, sooner or later an arrow would fall at just the right angle to bypass their circular shields.

Atop the wooden planks, Cleradic troops, faster and better armed, were closing quickly on their own tired and wounded men. It was soon clear that those soldiers wouldn’t be able to make it, no matter what.

Marco of Zonst closed his hand into a fist, and, holding his shield up with the left hand, drew his sword down on the thickly knotted fiber with the right. The captain followed suit on his signal.

It was a harsh world, but better two people left alive than none.

----

They had been marching along the bend for about four hours, when, through the fog that was now his thirst-addled mind, Marco heard the sound of hoofs. “To...m…”

“Shhhh. I know,” remarked the demon. He slowly moved towards a nearby petrified tree, propping Marco against it, lifting the human’s arm away from his own shoulder, which had been the only thing keeping his delirious companion upright during their trek. “Stay here. I’ll check it out.”

“Could… have… water…” Marco remarked, hopefully, as he fought to steady himself by holding
on to a stony branch. Tom nodded.

Pulling himself up with his solitary left arm, the Lucitor prince began climbing the same tree his companion now rested against. Marco knew that Tom could fly up, if he used his flames, but that would give their position away. He wasn’t sure if that mattered anymore. Footsteps meant life. Life meant water. Water was the most important thing there was. Marco had always heard that was true, known that was true, but now he really understood.

They had been following along a familiar chasm, which had once been a mighty river. For the last hour of march or so, the land on either side of the parched riverbed rose high up like a vertical wall, creating an impassable gap.

Tantalizing memories of the stream’s waters tortured the human’s addled mind. In his memories, and sometimes even in his failing desert-dry eyes, he could see the pristine yet poisonous waters as they had been the last time he had been here. He would have drunk them in a heartbeat! He would have found a way down the tall precipice somehow, and would have gulped down the noxious water without reservation. It had been, after all, only a hallucinogenic poison. Thirst itself already had him seeing things either way...

But, that was the problem, of course: the water he sought was only a mirage. Down the steep cliff, through ragged sharp rocks and treacherous dry sand, there was, in truth, nothing but a desiccated trench. There was no more water in the riverbed than there had been in the trees.

Not a drop of rain either, in three days.

There were clouds in the sky, dark storm clouds high up, giving them cover from the worst of the sun. But, so far, those same clouds had seemed content to tease Marco into the doorstep of madness, holding tightly onto their liquid gift. The part of his mind that could still function realized that, if the river bed was so thoroughly dry, then rain couldn’t be a common feature of this place. Maybe those were just clouds of ash and soot, like the foul dry storm that had first welcomed them here?

And so, they had followed along the dead river, looking for a safe place to cross, continuing their march towards what he hoped would be civilization or, at least, life. Until the sound of hoofs. Until Tom had gone up the tree to check. Until at least there was the hope that there was something else here, hostile or not, that was, at least, alive.

“Marco, we have to run, now,” came an urgent whisper from above him, as the demon boy hurriedly jumped back onto the ground. His three eyes were wide-open in fear.

“W… water…” the human managed to ask.

“No, Marco, there isn’t any. That thing is not... Look, just trust me on this,” Tom rushed to explain. Marco could see the hesitation in the demon eyes, like he was holding out on him, unsure of how much the human could understand right now. Marco couldn’t blame him for that. He wasn’t quite sure himself. “Can you do a ritual? The strength thing?”

Marco nodded.

“Do it. Then, help me throw one of these trees over the ravine,” Tom instructed.

There was a pause. Marco wasn’t sure what happened in that pause. His eyes had closed on their own.

“Marco? Marco? Stay with me, buddy,” the Lucitor prince spoke. Marco’s right cheek stung now,
somehow. Tom said something more. “... do you understand?”

Marco nodded, on reflex.

He began a series of gestures, and a series of words. They hurt on his throat as he spoke them out. They tasted like ashes in his withering tongue. They cut like knives through his weak broken bloodied lips. But he pushed through, trusting Tom.

Anger. Fury. But at what? At the demon? No. But there was no one else. Anger at himself? At this place? At Janna?

Did it even make sense to feel rage against *thirst*?

A fist. His fist. Impacting rock. Pain. Something broke apart. It crashed down. A long column of stone, shaped vaguely like a tree, fell over the ravine with a deafening thud. It created a bridge. The bridge reminded Marco of his dream, even though it was nothing like the bridge in his dream.

There was a furious neigh, back inside the forest.

“Well done, Marco, now, just hold on,” spoke Tom, pulling Marco’s body over his shoulder. The human went slack. “Ugh!”

Marco was burning with fever now, even worse than before the ritual. His heart pumped fast, painfully pushing pasty water-deprived blood through dried up vessel walls. Tom pulled him, almost carried him, through the irregular cylindrical tree trunk, and onto the other side of the waterless river. He dropped the human on the ground, like a sack of salt.

Through stinging failing eyes, Marco saw the creature, the thing on the other end of their makeshift bridge. It did, indeed, have no water, not even inside its flesh. It had no flesh either.

The terrifying horned horse apparition was made of something else entirely, something that wasn’t quite bone and wasn’t quite iron either. Its frame was a burned black skeleton, which grew seamlessly into spiky protrusions and defensive armor-like plates. Marco couldn’t tell where the horse ended and its armor began, or if indeed it was wearing any armor at all. The long wicked metal blade atop its head was merely the most prominent of the many similar bayonet-like barbs along its torso and legs. The entire gaunt beast was also covered in ghostly black flames, further blurring its almost wraithlike visage.

Marco had heard about not looking at a gift horse’s mouth, but this one had long sharp wolf-like teeth, more suitable for rending flesh than for breaking down hay. Its fleshless iron skull showed the lupine fangs all too well for the human’s taste. The glowing emerald brilliance filtering out of the monster’s empty eye sockets chilled him even through the burning fever, and not in a pleasant way.

“You know? I liked my undead horse better,” Tom remarked. “He might have been a big old debbie downer, but at least he didn’t look like his mother was a goddamn knife rack!”

A ball of red flames blasted out of the demon’s left (and only) hand as he spoke. It impacted the nightmare beast on the other side of the ravine, to no effect. The fire broke against the twisted black skeleton, and harmlessly splashed the non-flammable dry earth and stone trees around it. Ever so slowly, the horse began stepping over the fallen tree, following them to the other side. It huffed a small cloud of dark purple fire and sickly green smoke.

*’Hurry up and cut the goddamn bridge, dumbass!’* thought Marco, through the fog that was slowly settling over his mind. He wasn’t sure if he was scolding Tom there, or himself.
It was all a blur in front of him, fading colors, unfocused shapes, dimming light, blotches of red and green and purple. He aimed, as best he could, and kicked hard, with all the strength of the Fierceness Ritual.

Marco heard a loud furious whine, and then the thunderous breaking crash of the petrified tree smashing into pieces against the empty river bed, far below them. He heard Tom cry something out that he couldn’t understand.

The human’s last remaining shreds of conscious thought failed him, evaporating into one final desperate pang of thirst.

----

Marco looked down at the floor. It felt closer than it had a few hours ago, and closer than it usually did in his dreams. The marble and obsidian mosaic below his feet, depicting armies of angels and demons engaged in a vast terrifying battle, was a familiar one as well.

He raised his hands up to inspect them, and saw, not the large callused hands of a warrior, but those of a fourteen year old boy. He was back in his old body, and, from the looks of it, back in Sam’s infernal castle. Around him, he could now easily recognize that blasted ballroom once more: the one where they had attended the costume party, where they had fought the devil of marble and blue flame, where Star had…

He didn’t want to think about it.

But, well, why? Why was he back here? Another dream? It didn’t seem to fit the pattern.

Maybe he had died? It would explain why he was in hell, after all. Any second now, Sam would turn up, make some mocking remark about how dumb it was that he had died of dehydration, of all things, and then cast him into eternal fire and brimstone, or something like that.

Well, if so, then so be it. It couldn’t possibly be as bad as what he had just left behind. His only regret was that he never did figure out what happened to…

“Star!” he yelled in surprise.

The boy could hardly believe his eyes! Ahead of him, emerging from the door that he knew led up to what had been her room back when they were all Sam’s ‘guests’, was Marco’s girlfriend and best friend in the whole wide multiverse!

She was smiling brightly. Her young face held a look of indescribable relief and jubilation as she looked back at Marco. He was sure that, at that moment, he must have had that exact same look on him.

To Marco’s relief, the mewman seemed not a day older than she had been back when they had last left the devil’s palace. The only difference was her clothing. She wore the red (or was it pink? It looked red now…) dress she had worn the night of her date with Tom, the night of the Blood Moon Ball, the night their souls had apparently been joined together. Her hair, too, was made up in the same elaborate way as it had been that day, and the heart shapes in the dress matched her softly glowing pink cheekmarks.

She looked, well, amazing.

She always did.
The human boy ran towards Star. He hugged her close, perhaps just a little too strongly, as if he couldn’t quite believe she was really there. Indeed, he couldn’t. She felt solid to the touch, and Marco let out a sigh of relief. He had half expected her to vanish the moment he tried to grasp her in his arms.

“Missed me, Marco?” asked Star, grinning. She leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on his lips. “I missed you too. You seriously have no idea how much...”

“Of course I m... wait!” Marco had a sudden and horrifying realization. It sat heavy inside his stomach like a pound of lead. “If you are here, and I am here, and this is hell... does that mean that we are... that you are...” His voice dropped to a whisper. “... dead?”

Star just chuckled and gave him a reassuring smile. “Nah, Marco, we aren’t dead. I have been dead. This is not it. Believe me!”

“Then, what...”

“Shhh,” she shushed him, putting a finger over his lips instead of her own. She grabbed him by the tie, pulling him closer towards her. Marco noticed then, that he did have a tie. In fact, he was also dressed the same as the night of the Blood Moon Ball. He had the suit, the tie, the shoes, everything but the skull mask. “I’ll explain it all in a bit, Marco, I swear. For now, could you just dance with me? Only for a little while. Please?”

She dragged him to the middle of the ballroom. The human boy, dumbfounded, followed. Outside, through the windows, a red light filtered in. Not the burning reds of the City of Dis, but the flowing crimson of the Blood Moon.

From nowhere, and everywhere, came floating a hauntingly beautiful slow tune. Star began guiding Marco into their dance. Slowly, turn after turn, sideways walk after sideways walk, the boy’s confusion gave way to a nostalgic contentedness. Soon, he took the lead of their waltz. Star’s face lit with joy even further as he did.

Sparks of red light flew up from the floor’s mosaic wherever their feet touched the marble and obsidian. The tiny flickers fluttered softly up, like a swarm of fireflies, like minuscule red twinkling stars. Soon, the entire room was full of the tiny bright lazily-floating specks.

They danced in silence for what seemed like hours. Marco was terrified that, if he said something, anything at all, it would break the spell, it would make Star go away. He never, ever, wanted to let go of this, and he could tell Star felt the same.

Eventually, however, he just had to ask.

“What’s happening, Star? Where are we? How?”

“You are dreaming, Marco,” Star explained in a soothing tone.

She herself seemed to be in a sort of trance, staring at him with that persistent look of relief and longing in her eyes. They did a pirouette and she fell into his arms. He caught her theatrically and helped her back up again on the next beat.

“But, don’t worry, I am really here,” she reassured him. “I came to tell you that I am fine, Marco, that you will find me. Sooner than you think...”

The human boy blinked. So it was a dream, but Star was really there? Right. Of course. She could do that. She had been inside his dream once before, just like Hekapoo. Marco blushed,
remembering what that particular dream had been about.

That wasn’t the important part, though. Star was fine! And she was saying he would be able to meet with her soon, back in the waking world! That was the important bit, everything else was secondary. He looked at her, and smiled.

The princess seemed to wake up from her dazed dreamy look then, at least partly. Her expression turned into a slight frown just as she signaled Marco into an open change step.

“Of course…” She visibly hesitated. “... well, Marco, it’s just that… I might not look quite like this anymore,” she admitted, finally. “It’s been a pretty long time for me, after all.”

“Star, that doesn’t matter,” Marco reassured her. After all, even if she had spent years in Hekapoo’s dimension, she would be back to normal the moment they crossed back again. Besides, even if that weren’t so, the important thing was that she was ok. “All that matters is that you are alive and well! Sorry I wasn’t able to…”


Her face lit up again, with the light of the Blood Moon, and with that of the princess’ own shining smile.

“How about Jackie?” Marco asked, suddenly a bit apprehensive. “Is she alright?”

“She… has had some trouble adjusting,” Star admitted, pensive, as Marco led her into a turn and through the open door to the balcony. He could see the crimson moon floating above them now. “But she is alive and well, which is the important thing. We will find her. Then we will be together again, all three of us, happily ever after.” She beamed at him.

“But, Star, what about the thing that killed your mom? And Sam? And…” Marco asked, increasingly worried despite the princess’ joyful reassurances and tranquil tone. Or, perhaps... because of it.

“Shhhh,” she admonished him once more. “It’s been a long time, Marco. A really really long time. None of that matters anymore. I fixed it. All that matters is finding you, waiting for you, making sure I won’t ever lose you again. That’s what matters. That’s all that matters.” She took on an unsettling look of determination as she said that last part.

Marco frowned. Something wasn’t right. There was something the mewman was not telling him. Plus, she didn’t quite sound like herself, for all that her gliding dance moves and her beaming smile were so familiar to him.

“Star, I love you. I missed you so much, in just these few days. I can’t begin to imagine how long it might have been for you,” he reasoned. “But, well, what do you mean you ‘fixed’ it? You really need to explain what happened… starting with, I dunno... How long ago do you think you last saw me?”

The mewman smiled a sad bittersweet smile. “What does it matter, Marco? There will be time enough for that. The important thing is that we will be back together now. We will be together forever after. No span of time apart can compare to that!”

“Forever after…?” Marco asked, confused. That didn’t sound right. That didn’t sound like something Star would have said before.

In fact, those words reminded Marco of someone else. No, something else.
A horrifying certainty slithered around the edges of Marco’s awareness. With the arrival of that foul notion, the dream around him began to change.

The light that illuminated the two kids turned suddenly from a deep crimson red into a bright viridescent hue. He saw the glowing fireflies turn to burning embers and, then, one by one, fall dead onto the floor, leaving a gash of fading red stars atop the infernal mosaic. Sam’s castle, or the dream version of Sam’s castle, began to crumble slowly around them.

Marco turned his gaze upwards. The Blood Moon, right above them, had somehow turned emerald. Slowly, a long gash opened up in the middle of that green moon, looking exactly like the slitted pupil of a huge reptilian eye.

No. Not like an eye. It was an eye! And it was staring directly at Marco. A cone of blinding green light shone out of the gargantuan floating globe, centering around him and Star.

“Star… What’s that?… What’s happening!?” cried out the boy.

He tried to hold the princess close, at first, to protect her with his body from whatever this was, from whatever insane manifestation of the green fire abomination from before was coming after them this time around. Wish. Love All-Conquering. Whatever its godforsaken name was!

But, then, he saw Star’s expression. She was still smiling calmly at him, somewhat wistfully, as if his panic was not entirely unexpected, but just, simply... unwarranted, somehow.

Marco let go of her, confused and scared.

The mewman stared at him, looking hurt in return. It was the pain of his betrayal, plainly visible in her young forlorn face.

“Marco, you once said you would follow me, no matter what. Did you mean it, Marco?” Star asked. Her eyes began tearing up. “You said that... that even if I went dark, you would just go dark with me...”

The boy took a frightened step back. The mewman flinched, an old sorrow filled her eyes.

"Marco, you said..." she cried out. “You said that the end of the world couldn’t break us up as friends!”

The ground beneath them, the floor of Sam’s balcony, broke down into fine rubble under Marco’s feet.

He fell. Then all was darkness.

----

Marco felt something cold and wet on his lips, and realized that he was already drinking, even before he was aware he had woken up. His eyes opened up to a low irregular stone ceiling, and a small prison-like room.

He followed the delicate arm that had just now been holding the small wooden bowl to his mouth, only to find a young dark haired girl of amber colored skin on the other end, smiling relaxedly at him. She gave him a brief nod, and brought a finger to her lips. Marco flinched at the gesture, remembering Star.

He turned around, to the other side of the bed he was resting on, only to find a bald middle aged
man, in some sort of brown monk robe. He was leaning over a wooden desk, and holding a long black feather quill, which almost blended with the color of his own dark skin. Slowly, he put it down, near a stack of loose parchments, and turned to face Marco. The human could see a complex shape on the page, which looked vaguely familiar: an impossibly intricate flow of connected glyphs made of a single endless stroke that started somewhere near the middle of the page and fanned outwards.

“Oh, grand! Yours is final the awake-ing,” the monk spoke, in broken Riradesh.

Chapter End Notes

The first scene of this chapter was mostly written to fit the needs of this story, but also partly written as a fanfic-of-a-fanfic for Habit and a previous version of it was my private birthday gift to Grade.

Also, in case you wonder what Marco was drawing back with this description: "It was unlike the five or six pointed ‘star’ drawings often used on Earth, but rather a simple circle, representing a heavenly object, which then flowed at the top into a three-pronged crown of light. The stroke then crossed back the circle in a vertical line, ending in a second crown of light, facing down towards the earth." ... well, it would be roughly something like this:

star : celestial body, logogram, Riradesh, circa. 200,000 B.T.S.E.

Coming up next: Chapter 33: Matters of Theology
Chapter Summary

In which hints are provided as to the trials to come, our lone remaining hero must depend on the kindness of strangers, and we learn that prayers are sometimes answered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 33: Matters of Theology

‘And the armies and ships of men stood defiantly against the deity, declaring in their pride that they were beyond the reach of the divine. “We have mastered the powers of the heavens, and rejected the heavens’ mastery over us,” they claimed, one and all. And the deity wept at their vanity, which had brought them to meet their doom. And the deity cut a wound in the sky that rained fire upon the earth and waters. The seas boiled, the mountains trembled, and men were cast out from the serenity of the star-filled heavens, and into the darkness of the long reign of midnight…’

The long mandala-like text filled the page. Its twisting script sprouted from the center, and branched around in every which direction. The main thought flowed in a single expanding spiral, like a corked up orchid-stem, bursting into short blossoming sentences as it made its roundabout way to the edges of the space. Each sentence was itself an expanding idea, more a web of clauses than a linear string of words. Still, the basic narrative was simple enough to follow.

Marco sighed, lifting his finger from the coiling pattern. He had run into that same tale three times already that morning, and many more in the preceding few days, give or take a few poetic bouts of apocalyptic imagery. In every version, the general story remained familiar: human hubris and defiance crushed by the hand of a vengeful god, the world burning under divine retribution, the sky being torn asunder, and so on.

He briefly scanned the many parenthetical and sub-parenthetical clauses, the drawings within drawings of the complex non-linear script.

‘And the deity broke apart the heavenly rock, and its rubble blanketed the whole length and width of the world, and unto the four corners…’

Right. Nothing new there, either. Nothing he hadn’t read a dozen times before.

He was, admittedly, proud of the fact that he could understand the whole thing now. Between the endless dreams about his last time in this dimension, and all the reading materials suddenly available to him over the past week or so, his comprehension of the intricate script had improved - or, perhaps, recovered - dramatically.

Still, if there was anything useful for him to learn from this exercise, other than the language skills themselves, he hadn’t found it yet. It was a needle-in-a-haystack sort of problem: hundreds of
books, all in perfectly legible Riradesh, sitting in half a dozen shelves around him, and yet no way to know if even one of them was worth reading. A few were simply old accounting ledgers; very old accounting ledgers, from the looks of it. The rest were, of course, about religion.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, Marco reasoned. After all, it was an abbey’s library.

What he really wanted, however, was to learn more about the current state of the world: its political geography, and its recent history, not so much its mythical past. Specially given that the myths themselves were entirely different from what Marco remembered from last time, despite arguably having lived through some of said mythical past!

He had asked the abbot, of course, for some advice on where to start his search. The priest had first shown him to the library, after all, as soon as Marco began asking questions to which he did not readily have an answer. Or, perhaps, to which he couldn’t easily construct a response. But the old man, helpful as he tried to be, didn’t seem to think there was a difference between myth and history.

As for geography? He knew what maps were. He just didn’t have any.

Marco was looking for something, anything, that might help him figure out where to go next in search of Jackie… and Star. He had been in here for five days already, not counting the day or so he had spent unconscious, and every second felt more and more like a waste of time.

Abbot Thorn had suggested that he remain at the abbey until he was fully recovered. Even after that, the old man had recommended, in the strongest possible terms, that he wait for the next caravan to pass through the secluded monastery. He had resolutely insisted that the youth ought to travel back to civilization with the merchant travelers, rather than alone.

“Six days yours would be walk in forest. A forest are grey. Wild in shadows. Yours is not the sustenance,” the old man had explained, in his broken Riradesh.

It was not that Abbot Thorn was uneducated. Far from it! These were his books, after all, and the man could cite many of their passages from memory, with perfect Riradesh grammar and passable pronunciation. Still, when it came to talking about more mundane topics, or anything else that required constructing entirely new sentences, the old priest seemed to struggle somewhat.

As far as Marco could tell, Riradesh was not a living language around these parts anymore. Rather, it was something old books were written in, and there just didn’t seem to be any new books around. So, it was sort of like their version of Latin. Knowing enough of a dead language to read ancient liturgy was certainly not the same as being fluent speaking it; thus Abbot Thorn’s somewhat unintuitive sentence structure. Unintuitive, at least, to Marco’s ears.

The language the priest used to talk to his aide was a different one altogether. One which Marco had made much less progress in learning so far. Abbot Thorn, accommodatingly, spoke to his guest in Riradesh, as best he could manage.

“Sheirs is the bringing of food, and the carrying of water,” the old priest had struggled to convey.

It took only a brief back and forth for Marco to understand that the caravans were how this place got supplied. They were how it got every last drop of water and every last morsel of food. The trading merchants were the lifeblood of this place, in an even more literal way than they had been back in Qur Don.

For many days in every direction, the abbey was surrounded by that same dry wasteland of
petrified trees, devoid of any kind of life. Where Marco to travel on his own, even if he somehow
found and followed the best way possible out of the dead forest, it would mean many days of
march, without food or water.

This, coupled with the promise that the caravan was due to arrive in only one or two more days
now, and his own unspoken concerns about armored skeletal horses, had finally convinced the
earthling to wait. At least, for now. He wasn’t keen on reliving the experience of that initial march
from the portal, after all. Specially since Tom wouldn’t be around to haul his fainted ass this time
around.

“Yours is dragging by shadow… by evil-being,” the abbot had explained. “Silence’s, mine, is the
chase of shadow. Ours is the keeping of your safety.”

Best Marco could tell, that meant that the demon prince had brought the human here, saving his
life, only to be chased around as an evil fiend for his trouble. He could almost imagine the Lucitor
heir’s exasperation at the old abbot and the mute girl, as they ‘bravely’ tried to ‘rescue’ his
unconscious friend from him.

‘Well, that’s just fucking gratitude for you, isn’t it, kid?’ Marco thought to himself.

He shook his head. That was hardly fair! After all, he was talking about the same people who had
given him shelter, and shared their precious scarce food and water with him. Hell, even the gray
monastic robes and the brown leather boots he was wearing right now were likely some of the
abbot’s own.

So what if the old priest was a bit prejudiced against demons? That sort of stuff probably came
with the job, after all!

Still, Marco wondered where Tom had gone. He probably had set off to look for Star, or perhaps
Janna. It’s what Marco imagined he himself would have done, if he didn’t need to rest, or to wait
for the caravans, or to drink water at all, and particularly if he were being chased out of the abbey
as an ‘evil-being’ (or a shadow, or whatever!).

He had wondered, briefly, how it was that these people, in a completely different dimension, with a
completely different religion and system of beliefs, not only knew what demons were, but also saw
them in much the same way as humans did. Then again, demons apparently did look the same in
Mewni as they did on Earth, and the people looked more or less alike in all three places. Plus, well,
after meeting Sam, and traveling through a bunch of hell dimensions, Marco was beginning to
suspect that the concept of demons, or something close enough, was fairly universal… or, um,
multiversal.

Speaking of Sam and his hell, there was the matter of that creepy dream. The one that had taken
him back to that macabre ballroom. The one from before he woke up inside the abbey. The one
with Star.

He wasn’t sure now if the mewman princess had really been there, or if it had just been a simple
nightmare - a delirium brought forth by dehydration. In the later case, he still didn’t even know if
she was alive. In the former, well… as happy as he was to get any sort of confirmation that she was
alive, there had been something seriously wrong with that version of Star!

Maybe it would be best to assume it had been just a dream, for now? It certainly made it easier to
focus on simply finding Star, rather than having to worry about whether or not she would be the
person he remembered, once he found her.
‘Right, because willingly ignoring obvious bad signs and running right into the clutches of your prophetically evil, likely insane, magical ex-girlfriend sounds like a wise plan and not a recipe for absolute disaster. Isn’t that right, Marco?’ he thought to himself, again.

He looked up, startled, glancing left and right at the bookshelves around him. Not for the first time since his arrival to this place, Marco wondered if he was hearing things. It had felt like a thought, like him thinking to himself. But that just didn’t add up, on multiple levels. For starters, since when did he address himself by name within his own thoughts?

Marco was beginning to suspect that there was something very wrong going on inside his head. It was as if, some times, there was another voice in there with him. A harsher, more worldly voice.

It sounded a bit like that other Marco, the one he kept seeing in his dreams. The one who chose his next action by counting the dead either way, and trying to figure out which side of the balance held a slightly lighter pile of corpses. The one who, failing to save another friend, paused only to add their name to the tattoos on his back. The one who needed such a systematic form of mourning. The one who, which each coming dream, more readily sided with the pragmatic approach over his principles, so long as it got him close to his goal. Was that the inner voice in his head just now? Was that who he had to become, once again, if he was going to find out what happened to Star? To Jackie?

Did he even have the luxury of being afraid of that?

A knock on the door interrupted any further reflection on the matter.

“Yours is the sustenance. Mine is the bringing of,” came through the abbot’s calm, if grammatically challenged, voice.

Marco thanked the old man, opening the door for him, and gladly took the tray from his creased dark hands. The bald monk smiled at him. Upon the wooden board was a mug of dark ale, and a bowl with a stew of salted meat and some manner of tubers.

Marco vaguely recognized the reddish bitter potato-like things from his dreams about Ennio. While this version was certainly better than prison food had been, it wasn’t exactly a king’s feast either. After all, the abbey had to get by on whatever wouldn’t spoil in the long times between caravans passing, since nothing grew in the land around. For that same reason, however, it meant a lot that the abbot was willing to share it with his unannounced guest.

“Thanks again, Abbot Thorn,” Marco repeated. He had thanked the man many times in those few days, and yet, he hadn’t thanked him enough. Without him, and Silence, and, well, Tom, he would have died of thirst.

‘Thorn’ was not the abbot’s real name, of course. Nor had the mute girl truly been named ‘Silence’. The man had given Marco their actual names, at first, in whatever their native language was, but the earthling had found them unpronounceable. So, the abbot had chosen common Riradesh nouns for him to use to refer to them.

Over the last few days, Marco had developed the distinct impression that ‘Thorn’ held some solemn religious significance he was still missing. A lot of their religion seemed to be based on the concepts of sacrifice and redemptive suffering, after all. If anything, the boy in warrior’s body couldn’t shake the impression that the deity referenced in the man’s books seemed itself to be cruel, sadistic even.

“Mmm, Abbot Thorn,” Marco began, cautiously. He had held himself from asking before, out of a
fear of being an impolite guest. But, that last passage, the one describing the deity as raining fire upon the earth and seas, had given the human’s curiosity one final necessary push. “Pardon me if this is a rude or dumb question or anything, but, well, I’ve been reading the books…”

The old man’s face brightened with the eager joy of the would be proselytizer. He nodded, inviting Marco to go on.

“The deity…” the earthling trailed off, unsure how to phrase this nicely. “They don’t seem to be a kind god.”

That was an understatement! The deity of these people’s sacred books not only rained fire upon those who defied them, but, in less grad tales, was known to spawn monsters and burn down cities, seemingly without cause. It was an old testament god minus the doves and covenants. The stories about it spoke more of terror than devotion, or, at least, that was the impression Marco had been left with, after reading a hundred such tales. Yet, the abbot, an otherwise kind man, claimed to serve them.

“The deity is that of Midnight. Fear their cruelty and their wrath,” Abbot Thorn quoted, solemnly.

“Yeah, right.” Marco had read that particular passage before. “That’s the thing. If the deity is regarded as, well, evil, then, why worship it at all? Are you forced to worship it?”

“Theyirs is a demand for respect. Men’s is not the hubris to oppose the deity,” the abbot indicated. Then, he made that subtle cocking of his head, that microscopic nod that Marco had learned to interpret as a ‘but’, in the absence of the proper word. “Devotion is not to be brought by force. Prayer is not to be compelled.”

“Then, why… well…” Marco motioned around, at the books, and at the abbey itself “...why this?”

Abbot Thorn seemed to be a good person, Silence too. It didn’t add up that these people worshiped an evil god. Maybe it was Marco’s own prejudiced and overly modern view, but, even if their deity was real, and as powerful as their texts said, well, why would anyone devote their life to worshiping them? Specially when, based on what he had read, not only did people seem to be afraid of praying to the deity, but doing so was known to often bring harm and sorrow. Why would anyone willingly become a priest to what sounded more and more like this world’s equivalent of Sam?

The old man smiled, gently. “Yours is the perception of a conflict, where none is. Ours is the devotion to the deity, because ours is a wish of a better future…” He paused, thinking how to say the next part.

Marco just looked at the abbot, puzzled. He wondered if, perhaps, this was all something simpler than he was making it out to be? Maybe the myths were only myths? After all, these people’s life was obviously cruel and harsh. It made sense that any god they would invent would also be a cruel and harsh one.

“The deity’s bringing is not only that of harm…” the old man finally added. “Theiris is often a worshiping of desperation. Often. Not same as being always.”

“A worshiping of desperation?” Marco asked, seizing on the part he understood the most.

In all the days he had spent here, he had never seen the door of the chapel unlocked, or the abbot praying. The priest had explained that praying didn’t happen often. Back then, Marco had interpreted that to mean that it was reserved for special days or observations. But now, in
retrospect, it seemed like the old man had been hinting at something else.

“Consider Silence,” Abbot Thorn said, taking the lecturing tone of a preacher. His Riradesh improving dramatically as he was apparently able to just fill in the nouns to a sort of pre-existing template he knew well. “Silence prayed to the deity. They were with sickness of the eyes. Sickness of the eyes means they can’t hunt, can’t farm, can’t be scholars or warriors. Sickness of the eyes means death. They asked the deity to cure their sickness. The deity - blessed be, praised be, fated be - restored their sight, but took their voice in exchange. Theirs was a worthwhile trade.”

‘They,’ of course, meant the girl: ‘Silence’. Riradesh was funny about pronouns. Marco could tell, just from the word the abbot had used, that Silence was a person, born geographically nearby to the abbot himself, younger than the abbot (which, to be fair, was also plain to see), a subordinate of the abbot, and not blood related to him. Yet, nothing in the language told him she was female.

“Silence used to be blind, instead of mute!?” Marco asked, surprised. “And praying switched one for the other? Are you sure?”

“Mine was the witnessing... of their eyes opening,” the abbot explained.

So much for the theory about their ‘deity’ not being real, then! There was still something really messed up about healing the blind only to cripple them in some other way, though.

Of course, another possibility was that these people had stumbled upon some other source of magic, like the rituals in his dreams, and misattributed those to an non-existent sentient god. But, after meeting Sam and maybe some of his other party guests, the whole ‘there is a god-like being around these parts and he is a complete and utter prick’ line actually checked out as the simplest explanation.

“Ok, alright, so, I can see why one would do that, if they had no other choice,” Marco conceded. Then, the implications of such a form of prayer being an option, even one of last resort, hit him like a thunder strike. “Wait! What do you think the deity might want in exchange for finding a pair of missing, um, friends?”

The abbot glared at Marco, sternly. For a moment, the earthling was sure he had offended the man, perhaps by failing to be sufficiently impressed, or sufficiently reverent.

“And they prayed unto the deity to bring back their child, from the clutches of death, inevitable,” the old man cited from rote. “And the deity did listen, and the child did rise, and their heart did beat anew. And in the season that followed, one by one, starting with the child’s parent, who had been the one to pray, and ending with the hundredth and fifty eight person, who was the last in the village, not counting the child revived, all fell ill. And they one and all fell into death. And the child yet lives.”

Marco’s mouth dropped open, as he stared shocked at the grave looking priest. That wasn’t just old testament god kind of stuff, that was... it was... Marco wasn’t sure what it was!

“Ours is not the praying, done carelessly,” the abbot admonished.

Something clicked for Marco at that point: the nature of this place, and of the old priest before him.

“Wait! That’s why the abbey is here, isn’t it? In the middle of this desolated place?” he asked. “People can come, pray to the deity, and, if they get cursed or harmed, nobody else needs to suffer, only them and... well... yourself. And you... you are here to guide them through that? To tell them what is or isn’t a good idea to pray for?”
That would explain a few things. For example: why the abbey was in such a remote location, where few faithful would ever visit, other than perhaps those brought here by the caravans. It also explained why the chapel was kept locked. It probably wasn’t used often, given that praying was what you did only in the direst of situations, where a fifty-fifty chance of getting divine help or divine retribution was worth the odds.

The abbot nodded, briefly, but then he shook his head. “Right, but not right.”

Marco looked at him, confused. He had been so sure he had finally gotten it all sorted out. This man didn’t serve a capricious and cruel god, he served the people who sometimes had to deal with said god. Didn’t he?

“Mine is the serving of the supplicants, and the aid of those who seek the deity’s blessing,” Abbot Thorn confirmed. “But mine is also the service of the deity themselves, for the good of the all... not the few.”

He then walked to one of the shelves and took a small leather bound tome out. He regarded his guest then with a professorial nod, and handed the book to him, his wrinkled finger marking a particular page within.

“Yours is the knowledge. Mine is another task,” he explained, bowing as he began walking back towards the door.

Marco thanked the man, once more, who nodded back in response before leaving.

Abbot Thorn had seemed to be in quite a hurry, all of a sudden. But, to be fair, he had lingered in the library for longer than he usually did, answering all of the earthling’s questions. Maybe he had lost track of time and just now remembered that he had stuff to do?

‘Yeah, nothing suspicious with the kindly old man who serves the plague-bringing undead-raising god, nothing at all,’ thought Marco, perhaps a bit too paranoidly.

As he ate, careful not to spill any food onto the book, he began reading the marked page. It was clearly more recent than most of the other texts he had found so far, but it still felt centuries old.

‘A sermon, on the Problem of Good.

Midnight is the deity, and their acts are those which in the hands of men would be acts of evil. Thus some are wont to declare the deity evil. The deity rules over the land, and thus the land is dark and cruel. Upon it the shadows roam. The fangs of war, the venom of pestilence, the winds of famine, all these are much greater now than in the olden times of innocence, and even more so compared to the moments of the great hubris, before the fall.

But if the deity is all malevolent, and their power all encompassing, then how is it that good exists? In prayer to the deity, harm comes to the supplicant, but also, often times, relief. Why so, if their aim toward us is purely hostile?

The deity’s nature is not malevolent, then, but suffering. The deity suffers and wants, and so those who seek their blessing must suffer, and must want. For the deity can’t make us whole, while they themselves are not whole.

I have glimpsed the heart of the deity. I shall call them Midnight, for they are indeed a dark deity. They are not, however, an evil one. They wish not our death, or else we would be no more. They wish not our suffering, for its own sake, or else the pain of life would be fully unbearable.
What they wish for is reunion. Re-unification, with a deity of light. Our devotion hastens that reunion. The deity is not evil, it is in pain. The world is not filled by evil, it is filled by suffering. To stop the world’s suffering, the deity’s suffering must be corrected. To be whole, we must make the deity whole as well.

Then, ours will be a paradise like none before upon the three spheres.

High Priest,’

There was a signature of sorts, or perhaps a seal, under the High Priest’s title, but it was not in Riradesh.

Marco frowned. Well, that certainly answered… about half as many questions as it raised.

‘That’s religion for you, dumbass,’ Marco thought to himself. ‘Cryptic half-truths and speculation all the way down.’

He frowned again. That had once again felt like a foreign thought. Like someone else talking to him inside his own mind.

Something really fishy was going on inside his head.

‘There are a lot of things that are screwed up in here, actually,’ he thought in response.

----

The next few days only reinforced in Marco the feeling of something not being quite right, and not just with himself.

The trading caravan, which Abbot Thorn had sworn up and down could not be far away, was already three days overdue. More accurately, it had become three days overdue at some point that same morning. Night had fallen now, and the earthling wasn’t sure if he was any closer to being able to leave than he had been the day before.

The abbot kept telling Marco not to worry, that sometimes the caravans ran into delays (well, that ‘sometimes theirs is a delay’, but whatever!). With every coming night, though, Marco grew more and more convinced that he should be looking for a way to march east on his own.

Only two things kept him from leaving at this point. The first were the priest constant reassurances that the caravan couldn’t be too far away. The second was the man’s regretful but stern admonition that: no, Marco couldn’t just take some supplies from the abbey and leave by himself. “Ours is little water left. The caravan is to soon be coming. Better course is to wait. For all of us.”

‘Likely excuse,’ Marco found himself thinking, cynically. ‘Water is water, whether we drink it here or on the go.’

But, the other part of his mind, the one that still felt most like his roughly fifteen-year old self, wasn’t keen on picking a fight with the old priest, particularly not over the way in which he shared his precious little supplies. For all Marco knew, him being here, and the caravan being delayed, had already put the man and Silence at risk of not having enough water to survive the wait themselves.

Still, he was starting to feel that he was making a mistake by staying here for so long, instead of going out searching for his friends. The strange voice in his head strongly agreed with that sentiment.
That night, the ninth he remembered spending in the abbey, Marco had simply been unable to fall asleep anymore. Rest used to come easy to him, back when he was weakened, right after he first woke up here. But, as the days marched on, it had become harder and harder for him to sleep. It wasn’t just the restless energy of his battle-ready adult body, forced to wait in tense inaction like a jailed lion. It wasn’t just the ever mounting impatient worry about Star and Jackie, or his shame at not having made any progress in finding them. It was the dreams. His growing reluctance to watch yet another bout of bloodshed from his old sealed memories.

Instead, Marco roamed the lightless halls of the abbey, not entirely unlike a restless ghost. He walked silently, by unconscious reflex, moving through the long second floor passageway that connected his room to the library, tracing the same confined route that he also paced through during the day.

He found himself drawn to an open window, and to the moonless cloudless night sky. As usual, the only thing up there was that red stream of stars, with its bright violet centerpiece, and the solitary blue star on the other end of the skies. The moon was still nowhere to be seen.

In fact, Marco had been unable to find any moon in the night sky ever since Tom and him first crossed the portal. In the beginning, Marco had thought they had arrived during the new moon, but now he suspected there was something else going on. In his dreams, in his memories from the first time he visited this world, there had been a moon, one almost just like Earth’s. So, why wasn’t there one now?

Marco wondered whether he should go back to the library, light a candle, and continue searching there for any clues about the world around him. Hopefully he would finally find a misplaced map, or a history book, hidden among all the religious texts Abbot Thorn loved so much. Mostly, he just hated the feeling of waiting around like this, of not making even the slightest bit of progress in finding Jackie and Star.

The sound of light footsteps behind him interrupted his thoughts. Marco turned around. Something in his body lifted both his arms, before his brain even processed what he was doing, placing his hands in an unfamiliar, yet clearly martial, posture. He had expected Abbot Thorn. Instead, he was greeted by the sight of the young mute girl. Silence’s eyes lit up as she saw Marco, cedar brown specks in her amber face.

Then, as quickly as it had arrived, her smile vanished.

She pulled a finger to her mouth, in a familiar silencing gesture.

“Um, yes, I know...” Marco began, awkwardly.

If she was telling him again that she couldn’t speak, then it was a needless reminder. He hadn’t seen Silence much since he first woke up, and always with the abbot around as well to interpret for her, but it wasn’t like he was likely to forget that the girl was mute, or the reason why.

The girl shook her head, agitated. Pointed at Marco, and repeated the shushing gesture, emphatically.

So, he shouldn’t speak, either?

Marco nodded.

Silence pointed at him, and then at the open window behind him. She made a gesture of running legs with two of her fingers, looking at the man for confirmation that he understood.
Marco did, of course, but...

“Why?” he whispered.

Silence looked around, agitated. Then she looked down at her hands. She opened and closed her mouth. No sound came out. Clearly, she didn’t have a good way to explain to Marco why she was telling him to run away.

‘Look, idiot, do you need a diagram? The old man is sketchy as hell, and now this girl is telling you to get the fuck out of here, and fast,’ came the strange voice in Marco’s head. ‘My money is that, whatever it is that happens if we don’t, we don’t want to find out!’

Marco nodded. Leaving for later the requisite few moments of being extremely creeped out by the voices in his head. Whatever it was, it was right. He had to leave. The problem was...

“Water?” he whispered again.

He kept it simple, both to obey the girl’s admonition to keep quiet, and because he actually didn’t know how much Riradesh she understood to begin with. Silence seemed to think for a moment, confused, confirming Marco’s worries. The fact that the abbot understood the dead language, didn’t mean that a mute peasant girl did.

He made a gesture of raising a glass to his mouth and drinking from it.

The girl nodded in response and pointed to one end of the hallway, counted to three with her fingers, then made a motion of going left, followed by a pantomime of going down stairs with her fingers, then another count of two, and a turn to the right.

Marco made a mental note of the directions and nodded when he was sure he had got them all.

The girl nodded back at him, then began walking away, in the opposite direction from the one she had indicated. Then, she stopped, turned around, and made one more gesture of walking: a slow careful movement with her fingers, just as she brought her other hand’s index finger back in front of her mouth. ‘Be careful’ or, perhaps, ‘be quiet’.

“Abbot Thorn?” Marco whispered the question.

She shook her head. Then, she put her hands together under her left cheek and tilted her head, as if to indicate someone sleeping.

She followed that with a grimace. Then, she proceeded to put both hands together in front of her, one above the other, fingers curved and separated, touching at the tips. Slowly, she moved the hands apart and back together, like a pair of closing mandibles.

----

Marco tiptoed down the stairs.

He went over the plan in his head once more: sneak around, grab a mug of water, or a bucket, or a waterskin, or whatever, beware of something with fangs, escape the monastery without alerting Abbot Thorn, hope the mute girl is more trustworthy than the old priest. Somehow, his stay in this place had turned from vaguely disturbing Sunday school into outright horror movie.

With a name like Abbot Thorn, he really should have seen it coming.
Two doors to the right, following Silence’s instructions, Marco found the entrance to a large storeroom. Bottles of wine and a couple barrels of ale sat lined up along huge makeshift wooden shelves, and a few more rested inside small niches carved into the rough stone walls. Propped on the floor were a few dozen vertical barrels. About a third were open. All but one of those were empty, and the last was half filled with water. Marco tested a few of the ones which were still closed, and found them quite heavy. Even if he was wrong about those being filled with drinking water too, there was also a rather full looking stone well on the far end, along the wall.

So much for not having the water to spare!

Marco grabbed four empty bottles from one of the shelves. Surely they were meant to be refilled with wine at a later date. Instead, the boy filled them with water and recorked them by hand, as best he could.

After a brief quiet search around the room, Marco also found a shelf containing many large sacks of salted meat. He took a half-empty one for the road. It would last him the requisite six days, easily, if he was careful enough. Plus, the sack gave him somewhere to put the water bottles as well.

Marco swung the whole thing over his shoulder. The bottles, carefully tucked inside the pieces of hard preserved meat, made no sound as he moved the sack around. In his younger body, he probably would have found it heavy. But, now, he barely felt the weight.

He really hoped Silence was to be trusted, and that he wasn’t actually stealing from a kindly old priest. Of course, after seeing the bounty stored down here, that line about limited supplies, at least, looked to be a barefaced lie.

‘Pretty sure there isn’t actually a caravan, either, dumbass, given how long all of this food should last,’ thought the strange voice in his head. ‘Or, if there is, it’s going to be slave traders… at best.’

Marco was about to tell himself, again, that he was being a little too paranoid, when he heard a sound that made his hair stand on end. It was faint, but unmistakable: a horse’s neigh.

No. It couldn’t be! It had to be a coincidence… didn’t it? Perhaps the abbey had stables somewhere down here.

Marco hadn’t seen most of the place, after all. Somehow, Abbot Thorn had managed to keep his guest to the upper floors and, mostly, to the stretch between his room and the library. All despite never actually forbidding him from exploring the building. Instead, there was always an excuse: the chapel was to be always closed, of course; the kitchen was not a place for guests to see; the main gates were to kept locked, for safety…

Ok, fine, maybe he hadn’t been paranoid enough. Sometimes, the best way to keep a prisoner locked up was to make them feel they could go anywhere they wanted, and convince them to stay put.

In any case, even if this place had stables - and it very much might, for the caravans, if indeed those were not a lie - it would not have living horses. Nothing grew within two day’s march from here. Nothing for any beast to graze on! He was pretty sure the caravans didn’t bring tens of days worth of hay with them just to leave that and a horse in this abandoned place in the middle of a petrified forest.

Marco tiptoed out of the room, carrying his sack of supplies.
He heard another faint neigh.

It came from further down the hallway, from the opposite side of the stairs. For a second, he considered following the sound. Perhaps, he would be able to sneak a peek and make sure, before he left. If it was, despite all logic to the contrary, a flesh and blood horse, it might make his escape easier. But, if it wasn’t, if it was what he thought it was...

‘Screw that. I’d rather not find out that I’m right,’ he thought to himself.

‘Glad to see you do have a brain in here somewhere,’ thought himself back to him.

Marco climbed the stairs again, as silently as he could. His heart thumped inside his chest, but other than that, he made no sound. This body of him, the one that had spent sixteen years once before in this world, was well used to sneaking around.

He was headed towards the same window were Silence had met him a few minutes ago. There were no openings that he knew of in the first floor, after all. It was easier to just go back up and jump out of the window. He should be able to make the jump quietly. He had seen himself pull off much worse than that in his dreams.

Marco doubled around the hallway, and saw, in an instant, his plans collapse before him.

In front of the round glassless hole in the stone wall that was to be his escape route, sat Abbot Thorn. The old man frowned sternly, looking back at Marco with something akin to disappointment. On one hand, he held a single candle lantern, on the other, a small dagger.

“Apologies, but yours is not the leaving.” The abbot’s features hardened into a stony look of determination as he spoke.

Marco recoiled in surprise.

Then, merely a second after, he realized the absurdity of the situation. Marco knew karate! He had magic rituals! He had fought monsters and demons and whatnot. He was in the body of a hardened warrior, and with at least some of that man’s memories as well. Why the hell was he sneaking around in fear of this frail old priest?

Then again, there was that neigh to consider.

“Look, abbot, thank you again for all the help. But, well, I am leaving,” Marco explained. “And sorry that I am, um, kind of robbing you here, but it’s two bottles of water and a little meat, and you have plenty of it, and, well, I think you haven’t been honest with me so far... so... well... um...”

“Yours is NOT the leaving!” the man repeated, yelling. A blazing fury, tinted of insanity, danced in his eyes. He shouted something else, something not in Riradesh, and brandished the knife in Marco’s direction, slashing aimlessly.

Marco sighed. Harsher world. Harsher methods. He had seen it in his dreams, time and time again, and this version of Hekapoo’s dimension seemed - if such a thing was even possible - worse than the one in his memories. He was not going to last long here if he didn’t drop the goddamn boy scout routine.

For once, he wasn’t sure which of the two voices in his head said that last bit.

He swiveled on his left foot and kicked the knife out of Abbot Thorn’s hands with the right one. The weapon fell, clanking, onto the stone floor. Marco then used the remaining momentum, as
well as the downward pull of gravity, to thrust his falling sole straight into the center of the old man’s stomach, pushing him down. He tried his best not to injure the abbot, and was especially careful not to shove the his frail body over the window. The priest landed safely, albeit bruised and startled, his backside laying squarely on the stone floor.

Not wasting one more second, the warrior let down the sack he was holding and extended both arms in front of him. He made a practiced gesture with his hands: a triangular window between carefully angled fingers, through which he could see the sitting abbot. He repeated a series of words in the ancient tongue, and there was a brief flash of blue light.

“Mine are the answers,” Marco declared, forcefully, as the Truth Ritual took hold, imitating the abbot’s distinctive speech pattern.

It was the same ritual he had seen himself use on that young thief in his dream, a few days ago. Its power was to compel the target to answer truthfully. Eventually, of course, there would be a backlash, and it would be Marco who was forced to speak the truth. But, well, it wasn’t Marco who was keeping secrets in this situation.

“Why are you trying to hold me here?” he demanded.

“Theirs is the coming. You must wait,” replied the abbot.

“The caravans?”

“No”

Marco frowned. “Then who!”

“The deity’s servants,” Abbot Thorn explained, reluctantly. “Midnight’s shadows.”

“Shadows?” Marco had heard that term before. “Demons? Like the one who brought me here? The one you chased away?”

“A lie,” admitted the old priest. “Ours wasn’t the chasing away of the shadow. A Mare of Thorns was the shadow. Theirs was a willing surrender of you into our care.”

A Mare of Thorns? That had to be the horse beast Tom and him had fought! But, it had fallen into the dry ravine! Marco had destroyed the bridge under it! So, Tom had to have been the one to carry the human out of there. Hadn’t he?

“Is that thing still here? Are more like it coming?” Those seemed to be the more urgent questions right now.

“Yes,” the abbot answered.

It was the answer to both questions, that’s the only way the ritual would have allowed a single response. It explained the neigh. *Crap!* Marco wasn’t particularly happy about being proven right on that one…

“Why?” he asked, unable to think of exactly what he wanted an explanation for.

“To stop the world’s suffering, the deity’s suffering must be corrected. To be whole, we must make the deity whole as well,” the man quoted by rote. “For the good of all.”

The ritual did not compel a useful answer to a vague question, of course, just a truthful one. The
problem was, Marco was having a hard time thinking of the right questions to ask.

“Why me?” he asked. The voice in his head quietly reminded him of just how whiny that sounded. “I mean, does this have anything to do with me specifically? Or do you people just go around ‘rescuing’ and deceiving random people?” the earthling reflexively clarified.

The abbot seemed, well, overwhelmed, mostly. The magics demanded an answer of him, but his limited command of Riradesh was probably getting in the way of that. Eventually, he seemed to figure a way to obey.

“Yours is preordained arrival. ‘They who come on the 57th day of Spring is the Ancient One. Theirs is the tongue of old empires, and the tongue of dead deity before the deity. theirs is the being of the key,” he added, almost certainly quoting from one of his books.

Marco frowned. Preordained. That wasn’t good. A few months ago, he would have scoffed at the notion, but, after Sam, after the Blood Moon, after Wish, after… Cass...

“Preordained to do what?” he demanded to know.

“Theirs is the being of the key. To stop the world’s suffering, the deity’s suffering must be corrected. To be whole, we must make the deity whole as well,” the abbot repeated. “For the good of all.”

Clearly the man was speaking the truth, or what he believed was truth. At the same time, the ritual did not force him to give an answer Marco would understand. Ugh. This was getting him nowhere!

Preordained ‘Ancient One’ or not, Marco really didn’t have the time to get into the weeds of this man’s whole messed up belief system. Besides, now that he thought about it, that actually wasn’t even the most important thing he could be asking about.

“Do you know anything about…” Again, he found himself struggling to translate Star and Jackie’s names into Riradesh. “About a blonde princess? About a girl from the same place as me? About a boy with red skin and horns?”

“No.”

Marco sighed. Well, he had to ask.

“Where do I find a place that is safe?” he tried. Then, thinking about the situation, he added: “One that speaks Riradesh.”

“Yours is the safety. The priesthood’s is the knowledge of the high language.”

Obviously that wasn’t going to work for Marco, at all. But, it was strange. For that to be counted as a truthful answer by the ritual, then the abbot had to somehow truly believe that Marco was safe in here. Didn’t he?

“So, the undead horse… you don’t think it will hurt me?” the young warrior tried to clarify.

“The deity’s alone is the answer to that,” the abbot explained. “Yours might be the death. Yours might be the long life. Mine is not the knowing of the plans of the deity. Yours is the safety... in the life after this life.”

Yeah, no. Screw that!
“What is the closest place that doesn’t worship your crazy deity!” Marco yelled.

Abbot Thorn frowned, and for a moment, he struggled once again, futilely, to prevent himself from speaking. “The air raiders, the men of the knight captain, theirs is the sin, theirs is the defiance of Midnight…” He hesitated for a moment, before, finally, smiling triumphantly, adding, “mine is not the knowledge of where they reside.”

Marco, fortunately, was not an idiot.

“If you don’t know where they are, do you know how I could find them?”

“…Y… yes,” the man spoke, anger dripping from his voice. The word itself was torn out of his lips, compelled by the unopposable magics of the ritual.

It was Marco’s turn to smile. “How?”

The abbot fought the ritual. He bit his own lip. He covered his mouth. All Marco had ever seen in his memories told him that the man would lose. His hands would veer away, his mouth would open on its own. He would tell him what he needed to know.

“Y… yours....” the old monk stammered.

He opened his mouth wide, and closed it violently, only to immediately open it again to let out a long guttural howl of agony. He spat out something. Something fleshy and bloodied.

Before Marco could understand what had just happened, the abbot jumped up, forward, with the agility of a man half his age. No, with the agility of a wild animal! He reached for the dagger, which had a moment before seemed far beyond his grasp, and grabbed it in a single motion. Out of the corners of his mouth, blood splashed out in every direction.

He was saying something, a sputtering unintelligible noise. Even now, the ritual compelled him to answer, but not even magical control could make the broken mechanism produce the right sounds. The old man faced the young warrior, holding the dagger in his trembling wrinkled hand, wincing in pain. On the floor, a small puddle of blood pooled around the fleshy lump the abbot had spit out: the larger portion of the man’s severed tongue.

Marco prepared to defend himself, to disarm his opponent as he lunged at him with the dagger. The attack never came. Instead, Abbot Thorn raised the dagger almost to the height of his wrinkled grimacing face, then brought it close, and, in one swift motion, slit open his own throat.

Marco stood there for a few moments, shocked. He watched as the old man fell back down to the floor and slowly drowned to death in his own blood, with a smile on his lips and a look of devotion upon his face.

There was a sound, like a faint distant impact, and then another, and then two more soon after. They came from behind Marco, from the other end of the stairs. Getting louder. Getting closer. Getting faster. It took him a second to realize what he was hearing: the sound of hooves hitting the stone. Before he could react, the steps were followed by a loud, blood-curling, neigh.

‘Done staring at the corpse, dumbass? Let’s get the hell out here! Now!’ the extra voice in his head thought at him.

The boy wearing the warrior’s face was paralyzed, horrified. Even after White, and Sam, and all of his dreams, this was the first time he had seen another human die, up close, in real life. Well, not human, per-se. But, whatever the people in this dimension called themselves, to Marco they looked
the same as those on Earth. It didn’t help that it was arguably by Marco’s own actions, if not his own hand.

‘Look, even with the whole reverting to a dumb kid thing, surely you remember that one time with the lizard monster blowing himself to smithereens?’ he thought, recalling Toffee’s self-inflicted death. ‘What’s the difference? Evil asshole got what was coming to him, either way, and in both cases they ended up offing themselves! Good riddance, the way I see it. If you still feel you need to tattoo his goddamn name on your left buttcheek afterwards or something, then so be it. But, right now, we need to jump down that…’

The voices in his head didn’t even get to finish yelling at him. A blast of purple blazes came flying out from the side, hitting the corpse of Abbot Thorn, setting the old man’s robes aflame, and blocking the way out with a curtain of fire and smoke.

‘…window.’

Acting on instinct, Marco had jumped back, avoiding the flames. As he turned around, he came face to face with the gaunt figure of the armored undead horse from before. Against all the human’s hopes, the creature clearly hadn’t just been a feverish dream brought forth by dehydration. It was there, not so much in the flesh, as in bone and iron.

It stood still for an instant, occupying most of the width and height of the hallway. Its obsidian black form shattered whatever sense of normalcy this place still held, any trace of familiarity that was left after the abbot’s gruesome suicide. As before, the body of the beast was covered in sharp blade-like spikes, the largest of which sprouted out of its head like a horn.

When it finally moved, it did so slowly, towards the fallen priest. It seemed to ignore Marco, for now. At the same time, the flaming pyre into which it had turned the abbot’s body was set up to cut off the earthling’s planned escape route through the window. Soon, the body of the iron beast itself was also blocking the way to freedom.

The monstrous creature leisurely approached the corpse, it sniffed at it, let out a loud neigh, and then… it began eating, peeling the flesh off of Abbot Thorn’s face with its sharp canine teeth. It didn’t consume it, however. Instead, pieces of skin and muscle, along with the trickle of blood, just fell out of the corners of the beast’s mouth. The undead creature butchered the body with a hunger it could not satiate. Marco felt like he was going to puke.

‘Run, goddamnit. Run!’ he thought to himself.

Once more, he was actually uncertain of whether or not those were his own thoughts.

Either way, they seemed well worth heeding.

Marco turned around, and dashed forward through the hallway, in the opposite direction from the terrifying horse. He had, on instinct, grabbed back the sack of meat and water that he had lowered down to cast the ritual, carrying it once again over his shoulder. As soon as he ran, however, he heard a furious neigh behind him once more, and the sound of hooves racing over the stone hallway in hot pursuit.

There was no way Marco could outrun the monstrous horse. Plus, he couldn’t really see any other windows out of the abbey. None in this stretch of the hallway, anyways. The only window within sight, ahead of him, faced inwards, towards the inner courtyard, and even that one was far out of Marco’s reach.
The horse charged towards him. It lowered its head, pointing the sword-like horn straight at the boy’s chest. Any second now, he was about to become Marco-kebab. He screamed in panic, not nearly as manlily as it perhaps befitted his hardened warrior appearance.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ the voice in his head thought back to him.

Marco’s body moved on its own. Or, to be more accurate, his right arm moved on its own, swinging around the large sack of salted meat and water bottles, and hitting the side of the undead horse’s head. It was hardly enough to stop the charging beast’s momentum, but, at least, it pushed the huge horn to the side, towards the stone wall, and put a couple pounds of meat between the rest of the spikes and Marco’s body. Not to mention a splash of water between him and the horse’s ghostly flames. Just as fortunately, the sack was sturdy enough that this move didn’t immediately send a bunch of glass shards flying around as well.

Despite all that, Marco felt his entire right arm burning in pain. Maybe he had hit one of the sharp bits of the horse’s armor, even through the sack? Maybe the fire burned at him despite the water? Maybe just the force of the impact had been enough to dislocate his shoulder? Maybe…

‘Maybe shut up, drop some balls, stop your constant girly Marco whining for like five minutes…’ thought the voice inside his mind. “... and brace for a fucking emergency landing!”

That last part wasn’t really in Marco’s head anymore. It came, instead, loud and clear, from his right side, from the middle of his right arm to be exact.

Before the would-be warrior could process that development, however, his whole sense of direction was obliterated. In an instant, he found himself flying through the air, out of the inner window, and down into a sort of stone garden, in the middle of the abbey’s courtyard. He landed in all fours, by reflex, still unable to understand what had happened.

It took a moment for it all to click into place. His arm burning up in pain, turning purple, bending at the joints in an unnatural way, then extending forward like a huge squid tentacle. The fanged mouth erupting from it, talking to him, instructing him to brace for landing as the monstrous appendage flew towards the far window, grabbed onto the edge, and propelled the attached human out through the opening, and up into the air.

“Hello, Kar,” Marco said, as calmly as he could manage. “Thanks for the save…”

“Heh. That’s it? ‘Hello, Kar’? I was pretty sure you were going to piss yourself, if not at that thing, then at me showing up,” his very own monster arm commented, out of a fanged grinning gash in the middle of the cephalopodic feeler that had replaced the human’s limb. “Thought you had forgotten all about me!”

“Yeah, I well, I sort of did, I… um…. I am sorry…” Marco began. It felt weird to say that.

“Bah! Don’t be. I’d forget about you in an instant, if I could,” Kar’Margorach retorted.

It was a lie, and they both knew it. Though Marco understood then why his own answer hadn’t felt quite right. He smiled.

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that you still show up often enough… in my nightmares,” the human commented, not untruthfully. That got a chuckle out of the tentacle. “Speaking of nightmares, Kar, what are the chances that that thing is trapped up there?”

“Just about the same as those of it turning into a scurry of Merwiffs,” Kar retorted. It was
weird how a tentacle arm with a mouth could actually **shrug**.

“Yeah, figured as much,” Marco said, as he thought over the remaining few options.

All around them there was nothing but a scattering of boulders, half-buried inside a sea of red sand. The sand formed patterns around the stones, not unlike those found in a Japanese rock garden. Marco had seen this much of the inner courtyard before. It had made sense then, and it still made sense now. After all, given the location, there was no water for plants to grow, and no water for a stream or a fountain, so a rock garden was really the only reasonable option.

There were a total of four doors heading out from the courtyard. The two that were open led back inside into the wings of the abbey. The one on the far end was, supposedly, the always closed door of the chapel. The large one, in front, which had to be the abbey’s main door, was held in place with a huge wooden bolt, and an imposing padlocked chain affixing it tightly to both the gate and its surrounding walls. It was obvious, in retrospect, that those hadn’t just been meant to keep people **out**.

So, whether they chose to fight or flee, they were going to need the extra strength. Marco sighed, and placed both hands, or rather hand and tentacle, in front of him once again.

“Um, Marco, not that I don’t appreciate this feeling, you know, like old times,” the arm spoke.

“But are you sure you are up for it? Weren’t you in shock a moment ago?”

Marco’s memories about Kar were a jumble. He remembered, of course, the time he had first shown up - maybe the time he had been **created** - when Star tried to heal his arm with a spell that ominously contained the word ‘demon’ in it. He also remembered his dream, from back in Ennio, and how bloodthirsty the monster arm had seemed then. But, then again, he also had the vague impression that Kar had grown to be a good, if somewhat cynical, um, person, over the course of Marco’s sixteen years quest.

This version of Kar, the one who not only saved his ass, but was willing to dial down the mockery, however briefly, to ask how he was holding, well, that version was more reminiscent of some of the other dreams. Dreams like the one back in Crow Temple Mountain, which had to have happened half a decade or so after Ennio.

“Yeah, um, not sure if I am still in shock or not, honestly,” Marco admitted. “But I guess I’ll have to deal with that later.”

In a way, having Kar around changed everything. It made this strange world feel vaguely familiar again. It made him feel like the Marco in his dreams, like the kind of person who could deal with things like insane suicidal cultists and flesh eating undead horses.

Besides, even outside those dreams, he had seen worse things before, now that he thought about it. Like, back at Sam’s party, right after Star had… after he thought Star was gone forever. He had been able to act then, to at least try to help his friend, to fight back. It was the same thing right now. It wasn’t just about him surviving for his own sake. It was about finding Star, and Jackie, and even Tom.

Shock wouldn’t help him do any of that. But rage? Now, that would be quite a useful emotion in this situation. He began making a series of precise gestures with both hands, and muttering the ancient words that went with those. He called upon the old powers for the strength to fight his opponent, and the single-minded fury to see such battle through.

Somewhat disturbingly, the ritual seemed to flow just as naturally with Kar out there. The monster
arm quickly fell into a smooth motion that was vaguely analogous to the practiced movements Marco’s normal arm and hand were making. It was as if the gestures themselves had been designed for some appendage other than human hands, and maybe also other than purple demon tentacles, but could be translated to either.

Just as Marco finished the Fierceness Ritual, a whole section of the wall of the second floor exploded right in front of him. The pieces of rubble came falling down onto the sand, breaking the patterns and mixing in with the rocks already in the stone garden. Was it less Zen, or more Zen that way? Either way, Marco felt his mind being jolted as far away from meditative calm as humanly possible.

Blood pumped through his veins with a torrential pressure, barely contained by muscles that could have crushed diamonds. His heart pulsed with the rhythm of a hummingbird’s wings and the force of an explosion. His conscious mind drowned in anger, and from below it emerged a cold hungry thing that could rank ten different methods of murder before the eyes it saw through could blink. Whatever the ritual did to his teenage body, it didn’t compare to what the powers could do given the battle forged weapon that was his adult self as their starting point.

The horse didn’t jump down through the new hole, however, as Marco had initially predicted. Instead, it flew up into the air. Out of its back, it had sprouted a pair of black skeletal wings. There was no membrane between the bones, nothing that would have been able to keep a kite afloat in the air, let alone a horse-size creature made of bone and iron. Yet, of course, it flew.

Well, if anything, that solved the mystery of why dropping the bridge from under it hadn’t stopped the creature getting hold of Marco. He really hoped Tom was...

His mind veered away from such trifling considerations, pushing aside all other thoughts but the piercing focused hate the warrior felt towards the monster above him. It didn’t matter if this thing had hurt Tom or not. Either way, it was going down. All Marco wanted, right this moment, was to break that stupid horse’s spine in two. And, frankly, he saw no reason why he shouldn’t...

The warrior grabbed one of the boulders from the rock garden, with both his human hand and Kar. It was as large as his own torso, yet he pulled it out from the sand, nearly effortlessly. He launched it up into the air like a cannonball, or like the projectile from a catapult.

It hit the flying horse with a satisfying ‘crack’, sending bits of bone and metal flying around, together with bits of rock and a cloud of dust. The main projectile continued past its target, falling somewhere outside the abbey’s walls. Meanwhile, the beast let out an angry whine, and took off higher into the air, wisely getting out of range.

“You know, sometimes, I still love this goddamn ritual,” Kar declared, grinning.

“Just, keep me from trashing the place, Kar, the girl is still in there,” Marco noted, forcing himself to remain in control, despite the exploding rage rising inside him.

“I know, kid, I know,” the tentacle reassured him.

Marco wondered, with the part of him that could still think straight, how much Kar had seen of the days since the human had gotten back to Hekapoo’s dimension, and the days, the months, before that...

Then the flying horse interrupted Marco’s thoughts, headed back down in a fast dive, it’s fanged mouth open. Perhaps it was trying to bite at him? No. That didn’t make sense. The horn was a better weapon if it wanted to charge at him. It would slice through his chest and hit a vital organ
faster than the mandibles could pierce even his throat, and with far less precision required. Either the creature was an incompetent killer or, more likely, some other weapon was at play.

Marco jumped out of the way, just in time to avoid the stream of dark purple fire that the creature was puking down towards him. Even so, the flames splashed forth in every direction, setting a small section of the abbey’s roof, and one of the two side doors, on fire. It wasn’t much now, but the human knew the flames would spread fast over the extremely dry wooden ceiling.

So much for keeping Silence safe. Marco literally growled in anger!

The creature turned around right before it crashed into the stone garden, flying back up in an almost vertical trajectory. It was a maneuver which would have been aerodynamically impossible even for a creature whose wings could actually support its own weight. Of course, the magic keeping this monster in the air cared little for such things as the laws of gravity and motion.

Kar had moved on his own to block the preceding splash of fire, interposing its sinuous body right in front of Marco’s. Like the human himself, the tentacle arm had grown up in the sixteen years they spent chasing Hekapoo the first time around. Over that time, it’s skin had become coarser and harder, with defensive spikes that stood out of the fleshy appendage when it tensed in just the right way. There were few hits it couldn’t take, if it was prepared for them. Nonetheless, Marco felt the burning sensation traveling all the way up his right arm. It hadn’t even been a direct hit. The flames must have been hot indeed, if Kar’Margorach was able to feel that.

“Shit! Is that thing a bloody unicorn or a goddamn fucking dragon!?” cursed the monster arm.

Wait! A unicorn?

Right! That singular blade-horn, larger than all the other spikes along its body. How had Marco not seen it? Kar was right. The creature was not just an undead horse, it was an undead flying unicorn! Same as the ones that had taken them all flying from Dis to the stairs that led to the entrance to Hekapoo’s dimension. The ones that Star had summoned!

It was hard to recognize, all armored up and turned fully to bones, rather than still covered by a layer of emaciated leathery skin. But, at the same time, in a way, that wasn’t really that different from the way Kar had changed from the soft small form he had when Star first cast the spell on Marco’s arm. Hell, Marco himself had changed quite a bit in appearance compared to his fifteen years old self.

So, how the hell had Marco seen a magical unicorn, not once but twice, and not thought about Star!? He was such an idiot!

That line of thought would have to wait. After all, said unicorn had doubled back, and was sweeping back down a second time, opening its fanged mouth. A fiery purple light glowed menacingly from within the back of the beast’s throat.

Marco swore to himself that it would not fly up again. This time, he would kill it. He had to kill it. He wished for nothing else, but to destroy this twisted creature, and it didn’t matter to him whether or not it was connected to Star.

Drawing from his anger, and from the ancient powers that governed the magic of the ritual, Marco moved faster than he ever remembered moving. He rolled through the sand, and grabbed another boulder, even larger than the first. His bones tensed and bent, ever so slightly, under the sort of weight that would have snapped steel beams twice as thick as his own arms.
The monstrous unicorn adjusted its attack trajectory, diving directly for the human warrior. Exactly as Marco had expected.

As the blast of fire began, Marco threw the huge rock with all his might. The flames hit the rock directly, with enough force and heat to turn it glowing red, like a burning coal, or like a chunk of iron inside a furnace. It was enough heat to start melting the stone, but, apparently, not enough force to throw it back down.

The heated rock hit the monster’s head, bending its neck backwards with a metallic crashing noise, that was music to Marco’s thumping ears. Fortunately, the trajectory hadn’t been one hundred per cent vertical, and both boulder and massive iron beast fell near Marco, rather than atop him. A few burning pieces of rock still hit the human’s legs, even as Kar protected his face and torso. If not for the ritual, the earthling was sure even those tiny pebbles would have been enough to make him collapse down in agony.

He granted himself a brief moment to smile, instead. It was a deranged bloodthirsty smile, but also a righteously triumphant one. They did it! They had won!

Marco turned towards the nightmarish unicorn, trying to make sure, first, that it was truly dead now, and then, that it really was what he thought it was. The response to both questions came soon enough, as the fallen body began dissolving into a long flowing stream of purple smoke. It wasn’t a ‘poof’. It wasn’t pink. But it still fit the pattern.

“That… that thing… it… it was one of Star’s spells. Wasn’t it?” Marco asked Kar.

The demonic arm offered no response.

Marco’s head still pounded. His heart still raced inside his chest. His bones still felt the pressure of preternaturally strong muscles tensing around them. His mind remained clouded by anger, even after the target of his fury had been destroyed, and yet, somewhere in the deep recesses of his consciousness, an even darker feeling than rage was beginning to form: a gnawing terror.

“Marco, we need to find that Silence girl, before the whole place burns down,” Kar finally spoke, avoiding his friend’s earlier question.

Chapter End Notes

Space unicorn
Soaring through the stars
Delivering the rainbows all around the world...

Well, I think this chapter might genuinely win the prize for most misleading summary so far, and is not like I haven't been trying before! :)

Next chapter doesn't quite have a name yet, although there are two distinct candidates. We also might finally learn whatever happened to Tom at that dry ravine.

Also, in case anyone doesn't know this already: Kar’Margorach, as a very specific take on Marco's monster arm’s personality, is an OC of the fanfic A Habit Hard to Break by Akeara4 and Grade_A_Sexual. Although he has appeared before in dreams/flashbacks in this story too, for the true and original adventures of Kar and Marco, please refer to
that other fic! :)}
Chapter Summary

In which a girl is rescued from a fire, Tom turns out to be alive, two lovers have a long-awaited talk, and, um... ‘everything is ok’?

Chapter Notes

This chapter was fully written and edited before I watched the Season 4 premiere. No spoilers for it here, not even hinted at or indirect, except, obviously, by coincidence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 34: Imago Dei

The fire inside Marco had subsided somewhat, as the surge of power and rage brought forth by the fierceness ritual slowly faded away, bit by bit, with no target around to feed the flames. The fire outside Marco, however, had plenty of fuel. It had grown into a blazing inferno, one which now threatened to engulf nearly half the abbey.

“Silence? Silence!” the human shouted, as Kar used their remaining magical strength to push yet another pile of burning debris out of the way. Through the smoke, Marco thought that one might have been the remains of a door, but he wasn’t entirely sure. It could have been a tipped over shelf, or a mass of furniture all mashed up together and turned into a large amorphous bonfire.

“Never mind the irony of calling out for that particular name... You know the girl is mute, right?” Kar pointed out. “It’s not like she can reply even if she hears you, dumbass!”

“She can make some noise! Like, I don’t know, hit the walls with something metallic. Or just walk towards my voice,” Marco retorted, annoyed. He didn’t know if it was the leftover from the ritual, or all the smoke he was breathing, but he was starting to get a major headache, and arguing with his own right arm wasn’t helping.

“Assuming she is not actively hiding from you, that is,” Kar reasoned. “After all, for all she knows, you just offed her boss and then set her home on fire.”

“That’s not what happened!” Marco protested, as they doubled through a corner. “He, um, ‘offed’ himself, and the abbey, well... it was the goddamned fire-breathing unicorn monster!”

It sounded really dumb when he put it like that. But the damn thing had been absolutely fucking terrifying up close, and Kar knew it!

Marco hadn’t meant for the abbot to die, he hadn’t meant to fight any monsters, and he most certainly hadn’t meant to start a fire. He had only been trying to flee, just as Silence had warned him to do.
“Yeah, but I bet she doesn’t actually know any of that!” Kar insisted. “Frankly, I think we should just…”

There was a loud sharp noise, to their right. It was the sound of glass breaking, close enough that they both could hear it easily through the crackling flames.

“Ha!” Marco remarked triumphantly. “I was right! See? That has to be her!”

Despite the boastful tone, Marco mostly just felt relief at that point. He had been afraid that they were already too late. The girl really shouldn’t have to suffer because of her kindness towards him.

“That could just be something breaking from the heat, you moron,” the monster arm protested, but it rushed to clear a path in that direction all the same.

Actually, Marco had to admit, arguing with his right arm was helping. It kept his mind occupied, while their body acted in automatic: removing obstacles, jumping through curtains of flame, diving through deep black smoke. It kept him from wondering if the one person here who had tried to help him was, right now, in the process of burning alive because of his own carelessness. Well, it mostly kept him from wondering that.

There was a second sound of crashing glass, followed by yet another, and another after that. Eventually, they followed the noises back to the storeroom Marco had raided earlier that night. Through the burning pyre that had been the door, he spotted the lithe figure of the young mute girl.

She had made a wall around her, out of the wooden barrels. If all of them had been empty, then the wood would have caught fire in an instant. But she had placed the full barrels in front, opened them somehow, and had even toppled over a few, spilling the fresh water inside, making a moat against the flames. She had a few empty glass bottles with her, and a few more filled with water, as well as the remains of those she had smashed to get their attention. She was covering her mouth and nose with a wet rag.

“See, Kar, it’s exactly like I said!” gloated Marco, briefly. Mostly, though, he was glad to see the mute girl was alright.

Silence looked up at him, then down at the purple spike-covered fangs-bearing tentacle arm. She dropped the rag, brought both hands to her mouth and stepped back, pressing herself against the opposite wall. Her eyes were wide open, her body trembled, and Marco was sure she would be shouting in terror if she weren’t, well, mute.

“Um, Kar, I think maybe you should have gone back inside me…” Marco offered.

“Can’t seem to do that, actually,” explained the monstrous mouth in his right arm, twisting to face his human counterpart. “I tried it the moment you saw her, but it didn’t work. Urgh. At first I couldn’t get out, now I can’t go back in!”

“Wait, what do you mean you can’t go back in!?” Marco asked. “And, um, you couldn’t get out? Then how…”

“Look, Marco, not the time,” Kar spit back annoyed. “You need to say something, something charming and normal that will make her ignore you are half-monster for like two seconds, so that we can get out of here before this place explodes.”

“Kar, she barely knows enough Riradesh to understand ‘let’s get out of here’. How in the worlds am I going to explain... well... you?” He retorted. “Also... did you just say ‘explodes’?"
The monster arm just pointed to Marco’s right with its tip, drawing his attention to the shelves full of wine bottles. “See those, idiot?”

Right.

The flames hadn’t reached the alcohol yet, and it looked like the girl had doused those shelves and the ground around them with water. But, still, Marco wasn’t sure what exactly would happen if this room got hot enough and the glass bottles there did start cracking on their own from the heat.

While Marco and Kar argued, Silence seemed to have taken better stock of the situation. There was no way she understood English, but something about their comically incompetent demeanor had probably come through as non-threatening enough. Or, perhaps, she had understood Kar’s meaning through his pointing gesture. Either way, she was no longer panicking against the wall. Instead, she picked up the wet cloth and tied it around her face, leaving her hands free as she once again covered her mouth from the smoke. She lifted up a sack of meat and two water bottles. Then she began motioning with her arm repeatedly between the water barrels and the burning door.

Well, glad to know one of them had a plan, Marco thought bitterly.

Kar reacted before the human could. The tentacle arm shot out and grabbed one of the full barrels, using it to douse the flames between the two of them and the girl, like it was nothing more than a big bucket. With his other arm, Marco proceeded then to push aside the now cold remains of the door.

The girl ran towards the two of them, nodding with her head, carrying her provisions. Kar dropped the barrel he was holding back at the other end of the room, switching it for a full one. It was sometimes uncanny the reach that the monster arm had, without Marco having to move an inch from where he was standing.

They ran back out of the building. Kar using the barrel to douse any flames on the way, Marco and Silence coughing all the way through. She even coughed without sound. Whatever her muteness was, it was not just a fault of her vocal cords then, or something like what the abbot had done to himself by biting off his tongue. She simply couldn’t make sounds with her mouth, at all. It was obviously a magical muteness, it had the same sort of physics-defying feeling to it as the undead unicorn flying on skeletal wings.

They got out through the same door Marco and Kar had used to come into the burning building, back into the stone courtyard. A moment later, before he and the girl could even recover their breath, there was a loud boom. Kar moved around them to shield them both from the flames bursting out of the opening.

“Called it!” it boasted back to his human half.

The good news was, that explosion seemed to have consumed much of the remaining fuel, or perhaps the remaining oxygen, inside the building. After that, the flames quickly began to subside, burning only along the last remaining bits of wood in the ceiling of the now barren stone structure. For what it was worth, it seemed like the fire had been contained to the left wing of the abbey, leaving the other side, as well as the chapel and the stone bridge over the outer gate, intact.

Silence nodded, and made a gesture Marco didn’t quite recognize, but which he could imagine, from the expression, was meant to be one of gratitude.

“You are welcome,” said Kar, who apparently thought the same thing.
The girl took one step back, looking uncertain at the monster arm. Glancing between him and Marco, she pointed at Kar and then made that ‘closing fangs’ gesture she had used to warn him about the horse monster. Her eyes showed doubt, telling him it was a question.

A good one at that. Kar was a monster, and a magic spell, and for all he knew he was indeed the same as that thing, except, well…

“Friend,” he said in Riradesh.

Silence nodded, somewhat doubtfully.

“Silence?” Kar pointed at her, with the tip of his body, albeit leaving a safe comfortable distance. Then, he coiled around himself at least twice before pointing right back at himself.

“Kar’ Margorach”

‘Show off,’ Marco thought. But the girl just nodded.

She pointed at herself, then at the two of them, then at the sack behind her, and at the padlocked main door. She followed that with a running feet motion with two fingers. Apparently, she still thought they should get out of here quickly and, this time, she was going with them.

Kar wasted no time in pulling at the chain locking the front door, and breaking it in two with the last remaining embers of the fierceness ritual’s strength. Marco was wondering how to break down the news about Abbot Thorn to the girl, if indeed he had ever been her friend and mentor, and not, like, her jailer or something. But that was one messed up game of charades that would have to wait; ideally until they were far away from this place.

The tentacle arm lifted the wooden bolt, dropped it to the side, pushed the door of the abbey ajar ever so slightly, and then… slammed it back shut.

“Ugh. Marco, I don’t think this is going to work,” Kar remarked, as he replaced the wooden bolt and hastily tied together the remains of the broken chain around it.

“What do you meaaa…?” Marco wasn’t able to finish his question.

Instead, he quickly found himself flying up into the air. Kar had, without giving him any heads up this time around, gotten hold of another of the inner windows of the abbey, and was using it to propel Marco up. They landed, again, on all fours, on top of the wooden ceiling. On the not-burned-down side of the building, of course.

“Ugh. What the hell K…” the human started to complain. Then he caught in the view. “Oh, crap!”

Below them, all around them, all around the entire building, were monsters. Not ‘Buff Frog’-like monsters, either. These were creatures of nightmare, like the undead horse from before. Smaller. Perhaps slightly less threatening, when considered individually. But there were so many!

The largest crowd was concentrated near the main gate, but they crawled all over the place. A number of them were systematically patrolling around the mostly undamaged right wing. A few others seemed to be moving around the charred husk of the left building. Marco couldn’t quite see the other side of the chapel building from here, but he doubted that would look any different.

There were giant skeletal cats with three green-glowing eyes and bony tails ending in vicious stingers, like those of a scorpion. There were ghostly moths made of bright blue flames, sharp carnivorous fangs sticking out of their open mouths. There were slitted eyeballs connected to nothing but eight spike-covered iron spider legs. There were winged boars made out of a tar-like
substance, who switched between that form and oily black formlessness right under the human’s eyes. There was a snail creature, taller than Marco, whose front end had not quite a face, just a huge mouth full of rotating obsidian teeth, and which had apparently left a trail of burned stone trees in its wake.

“A forest are grey. Wild in shadows,” Marco quoted the abbot’s broken Riradesh.

“Right…” Kar sighed. “Pretty sure we are not making our way through that.”

Marco wondered if the monster arm was thinking the same thing as him. All of those creatures looked terrifying, but, also, just barely, familiar.

----

‘Mephistopheles on a monocycle, damn this blasted fog!’ thought the demon prince to himself. It had almost become a mantra of him, at some point during the long indistinct days he had spent lost in that grim monotonous emptiness.

Days, plural. He had been trapped in here for days. He was certain of it. How many? Five? Ten? Twenty? Only the Astray One knew, and he certainly wouldn’t care to come tell him! Nor, for that matter, would anyone else. Star was gone. Janna was gone. Even Marco was gone.

His parents? Well, if time flowed here as it had back in the petrified forest, if this was still part of Hekapoo’s former domain, then his parents might well take thousands of years just to think to begin looking for him, let alone find this place. Even Tom Lucitor would age and wither away to nothingness in a hectomillennium or so. From the perspective of anyone operating in Mewni time, that would be just a couple months to search the wide multiverse!

He wondered, if worst came to worst, would he dare call out for Sam to help him? Would the devil answer? He wasn’t that desperate. Not yet. Probably not for a few dozen centuries. Back in the Pale Wastes, Sam had showed up unbidden, but, then again, maybe the Endless Shadow’s plans for Tom had ended the moment the young demon had brought Star to Dis. It seemed likely, in retrospect, that that had been the devil’s true gambit all along.

His arm ached, his missing arm. The wetness suffusing Tom’s flesh was only making worse what was already a preternaturally painful wound. Damn the fog, once again! It clung to him, the moisture draining his flames and causing the stump to sting with what he could only hope was not actual putrefaction. The demon prince had seen plenty of rotting bodies in his time. He hadn’t, until now, ever imagined that his own flesh could be so affected.

Tom had given up on that arm ever growing back. Whatever Star had done to him, it was permanent. But, well, shouldn’t it at least heal at some point? Become scarred and hard, rather than remaining tender and raw forever? Or would his body keep trying to regrow that which could never be recovered, until he went mad from the painful blistering sensation of skin growing back aimlessly only to be immediately burned down again? All while the ever fresh wound absorbed the cold humid air around him.

Where even was he? He hadn’t been able to figure out that much. Of course, it didn’t help that he couldn’t see anything beyond the palm of his own, singular, hand. Nothing but mountainous shadows in the distance, where the blue-tinted whiteness of the ever present mist turned darker, and only slightly more solid, as massive far ridges blocked the formless brightness.

Thrice damn the blasted fog!
He had learned only two things, in unknown days of meaningless wandering. The first was that there were actually no days in here, as one normally counted such things, no cycle of light and darkness, no sun or moon or stars above, no dawn and no dusk. Instead, the light was always there, diffuse through the omnipresent fog, coming from no particular point other than a general ‘above and around’ direction. When Tom reckoned having been here for days, he meant the rough span of time, rather than the interval between sunrise and sunset.

The second thing he had learned, was that he was traversing a mountain range of sorts. He learned this more by touch than by sight, as he walked nearly blind through rough inclined paths and narrow ledges, above falls of unknown depth. He lost his footing more than once, near the beginning, having to rely on his flames to fly up again. Each time, he had to keep himself airborne until he found, often by pure coincidence, some piece of solid land at just the right angle and elevation for him to stand on. He wasn’t sure how far up the mountains went, or how far down. For all he knew, the vertical dimensions of this place could well have been infinite. There were certainly places like that, in hell. Still, he doubted this was quite the same.

Tom had tried using his flames to see around him, of course. And just as surely, the effort had been fruitless. Whatever he gained in piercing an arm-length or so out of the fog immediately around him, he lost by occluding all the far mountain shadows, losing the precious few guideposts that this strange empty place had to offer.

Empty. That was the operative word. Absolutely and utterly empty. Nothing but rocks and fog. No animals, no plants, certainly nobody to talk to, other than himself, and he wasn’t going to just start doing that! Only crazy people argued with themselves all alone, after all.

The demon prince often wished Marco were still around, if only to have someone to talk to. Then again, even with plenty of water in the air, there was still no food around. The human would have soon died in this place anyways. So maybe it was good that Tom was alone.

Of course, for all he knew, Marco was dead, either way.

He had seen the monstrous horse rise from the precipice, thwarting the delirious human’s attempt at stopping its pursuit. It flew up, held aloft by a previously hidden pair of skeletal wings. It had been a terrifying visage, even by demonic standards.

What had happened to Star, for her spells to look like that now?

Tom knew that had to be Star. It was obvious! He knew those magics. He would recognize them anywhere, even in such a dark twisted form. The mewman’s energy was always present in his mind these days, always with him, probably due to it still acting on the stump left by her deadly spell. He could feel her powers even now. But it was a diffuse feeling, like the light of this place, coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. Back then, staring at the undead monstrous unicorn, he had felt Star’s magic bright and focused, flowing from inside the creature itself.

The demon prince had tried shouting at it, after the spell-construct began flying towards them, opening that terrifying fanged mouth. He pleaded for it to stop. He called out for Star, to no avail. Then, just before the creature of bone and iron reached him, Tom had fallen backwards through something, a swirl of gold and orange, and found himself, well, here. Wherever ‘here’ was.

The Lucitor boy didn’t know what had made the portal. He didn’t even know if portals could be made anymore! At least, temporary ones, ‘dimensional scissors’-type portals, as opposed to the old and nearly forgotten gateways between worlds. Apparently, they could. But, then… by whom? Sam? No, not his style. Besides, it had seemed more like one of…
Nah, that couldn’t be. She was dead, wasn’t she?

Then again, Marco had been so convinced, so sure, that Hekapoo was still alive, in some form or another. Back then, back when they both went into the room of maps together. Tom never quite believed the human, of course. He was here only because Star had wanted to come, because Marco had convinced her to follow him in this wild goose chase. Well, look where that had led them to!

Still, he really hoped that Marco was alright. He should have been, after all, if that unicorn monstrosity had indeed been one of Star’s creations. There was something really wrong with Star’s magic, of course. There was no denying that. He could feel it around him now, in the energies left over from her dark deadly spell. He had felt it even more clearly emanating from that undead horse apparition. Magic bloated with anger, with pain, with desperation, and… something else, something far more alien to the demon prince’s senses. But, even so, Star was, or had been, in love with the human boy. She wouldn’t hurt him. Would she?

Tom’s right arm ached sharply by way of a response.

Right.

As he thought about Star, and about the unnerving darkness he had sensed - and seen - in her living spell, the stump in his right arm had begun hurting more and more. He felt, in the empty world around him, the echo of the mewman’s energy grow louder and louder to his unearthly senses.

A coincidence, he imagined at first. Until he began to notice too a shift in the light, a green tint, far to the left of where he was looking, taking over the ever-present blue of the place.

He turned around slowly, glancing far into the mists, at the tiny bright speck that shone through the white nothingness. It moved fast, like a shooting star. Yet it also zig-zagged erratically through the firmament, like a firefly, eschewing any set trajectory. The fog, and the distance, did not allow the demon prince to guess at its size or shape. The only thing that was clear, is that it was drawing nearer. Not in a straight line, of course, but slowly, through a circuitous path, as if it were searching for something.

He had seen it before, once or twice in the long time he had spent lost here, but never quite this close. Another spell, perhaps? But, if so, then it was a powerful one. Maybe it was actually her? Star. Starship.

But, even if that was her, after what had happened back in the petrified forest, Tom wasn’t sure calling out would be a good idea. Instead, he slowly dropped to the ground, making sure to hide the bright red of his eyes despite the pain, holding his fire close inside him.

He waited. Maybe, just maybe, he would be able to get a better look this time around, before whatever it was noticed him.

----

The creatures had kept gathering around the abbey, slowly, arriving one at a time. They weren’t going anywhere, but neither were they rushing in. Not yet, at any rate. Apparently, after what Marco and Kar had done to their equine friend, they were quite happy to wait for even more absolutely overwhelming odds.

There were two other such iron and bone horses up there now, in addition to everything else. They circled the abbey like vultures, high up in the air. They weren’t getting within reach of any thrown stones, fierceness ritual or not, but they would easily spot anyone trying to leave the building, in
any direction.

Marco and Kar had explained the situation to Silence. Which is to say that, for the sake of expediency, they had lifted her to the rooftop and shown her the view. Whatever discomfort the girl had initially shown at the idea of letting the demonic tentacle manhandle her, was quickly replaced by raw blood-freezing terror at the abominations slowly congregating beyond the gates.

The three of them must have spent only a few minutes up there. Yet it felt like hours. In that time, however long or brief it had been, the two horses, plus four or five other smaller horrors, had arrived at the walls of the abbey.

Eventually, it was the mute girl who, once again, had an idea.

She guided them back down, towards the back of the courtyard. With no better option to explore, the other two followed her lead. Marco hugged her this time, as Kar lowered both of them halfway down from the roof, before the human took over the rest of the leap. Once safely on her feet, Silence motioned towards the door of the chapel, gulped nervously - yet entirely soundlessly - and made a meaningful gesture of striking her own fist against her palm.

Even without the ritual, Kar didn’t need much effort to break down the locked door, following the mute girl’s instruction. The wood cracked under the hardened tentacle fist, revealing a sight that all but confirmed Marco’s worst fears.

The decor wasn’t all that impressive by Earth - or Mewni, or Zonst - standards. No high vaulted ceilings, no golden bas reliefs, no stained glass windows. Instead, there were dozens of rugs and pelts covering the hewn stone walls, as well as the floor, of the private-seeming chamber. They each showed depictions, in various styles and levels of detail, of what seemed like kneeling praying men and women. One particularly elaborate tapestry, all the way to the back, showed twelve of the skeletal unicorns descending from the sky towards a crowd of genuflecting people. Marco wasn’t sure if they were cowering from the monsters or, perhaps, revering them.

Furniture was sparse, consisting of a few small tables covered in red wax candles, as well as six tall brass poles ending in shallow bowls of what was probably some form of incense powder. There was a circular prayer mat on the floor near the end and, in front of it, a tall dais, holding a single human-sized statue. It seemed to be chiseled out of the same white stone of the petrified Katato trees.

It was this centerpiece which worried Marco the most. It depicted a six armed, six winged, female figure.

At first, the human wasn’t quite sure it was who he thought it was. But, as Silence entered the dark room after him, she began lighting a few of the candles in the tables around them. Crude as the statue might have been, dim as the room remained, there was no mistaking the figure. It was obviously mewman, in butterfly form. It had to be Star.

Taller, no doubt. Older, of course. But, then again, so was Marco himself.

“The deity?” Marco asked in Riradesh. Silence nodded, confirming what he had already long dreaded to be true.

The girl then walked up to the stone statue and, without hesitating, began pushing at the figure’s knees, trying to topple the whole thing over. Marco and Kar stood there, dumbfounded, until Silence motioned them, with some haste, to help her.
He had no idea what they had to win from defacing the altar, but, with no better plan of his own, Marco decided to follow the girl’s lead. “Sorry Star…”

Marco leaned onto the effigy, Kar too. They began hesitantly at first, but soon found themselves putting their combined body weight behind it, digging their heels into the chapel’s carpeted floor for leverage. It barely budged. After all, an adult-mewman sized chunk of stone was bound to be far heavier than the real thing would have been. For a moment, Marco wondered if they would need the power of the fierceness ritual just to bring it down. That turned out not to be necessary. Slowly, the statue’s base began sliding over the dais, until its center of mass finally made it past the raised platform. After that, it quickly fell backwards with a thunderous crash.

Pieces of stone splattered around the floor, including the statue’s head, which bounced on the far wall tapestry and came rolling back towards Marco’s feet. The hastily sculpted face looked at the human with what he imagined to be reproachful annoyance. Marco flinched in response.

Then, he looked back at the dais, and finally understood what Silence was trying to accomplish. Under the statue’s base, was a small wooden trapdoor. The girl quickly opened it up, revealing a narrow stone stairwell. Marco and Kar walked forward and looked down. It was far too dark to see the bottom, and it looked like they would barely fit, hunched down, through the spiral stairwell.

“How far does it go? Does it exit outside the abbey?” asked Marco in Riradesh. Silence looked back at him, confused.

Right...

He lifted one finger up, then began making different ‘distance’ gestures with his hand and tentacle, placing them first close together, then farther and farther apart, trying to give his expression a questioning quality. ‘How far?’ was what he was, ineptly, trying to mimic, attempting to bridge the communication gap created by her limited Riradesh and his complete ignorance of the girl’s native language. Silence raised a hand to stop him and walked away, towards one of the brass incense bowls.

“Nice flirting there, casanova!” remarked Kar, the entire length of the monster arm shuddering with a laugh.

Flirting? What the hell was he talking ab… oh... Oh!

Marco frowned, then blushed. Damnit Kar! That’s not what that gesture had meant at all!

Before Marco could think of a retort, he noticed that Silence had begun carefully spilling the bright white powder over the dark floor carpet. She was tracing lines with it: two parallel lines, interrupted at points by other parallel pairs, perpendicular to the original two. Wait. Hallways! Tunnels! She was drawing a map!

“Oh, someone here is actually clever,” remarked Kar. “Hey, say, Marco: why can’t I be attached to her instead?”

This time, Marco did have a retort handy. “Well, obviously she is too smart to let that happen to her.”

Kar chuckled.

Silence looked at the both of them confused and pointed back down at the map.

Ok, right, she had a point. Marco began trying to memorize what she was drawing. It was a big
Three doors, then a right, then five doors and a left, then… whoa, twenty-seven doors!? How big were those tunnels anyways? No, no, focus.

“Three and a right. Five and a left. Twenty-seven and a right. Down three flights. Fifty-eight and a left. Two and up again. Then straight until the stairs out,” recited Kar calmly. He seemed serious for once. “Don’t worry, kid, I got it. But, of course, I still have to ask… why exactly is it that she isn’t coming with us?”

“Uh?” Marco failed, at first, to understand the monster arm’s comment. Then it hit him: she knew the way by heart. If she were going with them, they wouldn’t need a map. “Silence?” he asked.

He pointed at the girl, and made a motion towards himself, and finally to the tunnel, asking her to follow. She shook her head, sadly, pointed at him, then at Kar, then at the sack of food and water, and, finally, at the stairwell.

“I don’t understand,” Marco said. “What about the monsters? The, um, shadows?” He motioned towards the outside door of the chapel, and made that ‘biting fangs’ gesture with his hands - well, hand and Kar - he had learned from her. “Are you safe?” He pointed at her and made like, well, a worried hugging motion. It was the best he could think of on the spot, ok?

Silence sighed. She smiled weakly and shook her head again. She pointed at herself and, with a sad but resigned expression, made a sliding motion with her finger along the length of her neck. Marco, remembering Abbot Thorn’s fate, shuddered.

“But… why?” He asked.

Silence just stared at him blankly. Clearly, she didn’t know the right gestures to explain. Instead, she pointed back at the trapdoor, then up at the ceiling, made another ‘fangs’ gesture, and waved her hands furiously away from herself, telling the other two to hurry.

A moment later, her body started to tremble.

“Uh? Silence?” Marco called out. “What’s happening? What’s the matter?”

The mute girl was panicking now, hyperventilating. And still she made motions for Marco to leave. She opened her mouth wide. Her face contorted into a silent terrified scream, the sound itself magically suppressed by whatever power had robbed her of her voice. She pointed furiously at the sack and the stairwell, growing more and more desperate.

Kar reacted to that without delay or hesitation, grabbing the supplies with its sinuous body and pulling their combined body to leave. Marco, less wisely, chose to run towards Silence, overriding his sharper half, just as her eyes closed and her body began to collapse.

He caught her before she reached the floor.

Then, in a familiar voice, eyes still closed, the mute girl spoke.

“Hey, um, Marco. Is that you? Can you hear me? It’s me. I, uh… I am sorry about the wamicorn, ok? Just, um, we need to talk. Please, just hear me out. You need to stop running away…”

“Star!”

----

Tom had waited, crouched silently against the barely-visible stone, in the midst of the sopping cold
fog, as the whiteness around him became a sea of emerald clouds. Star’s unmistakable magical resonance suffused the place, greater and wilder than he had ever felt it. Brighter than it had been during her fight with Sam. Fiercer than that time in the silver staircase, the time she had fought Wish, and Janna, and burned Tom’s own arm away.

Could she sense him as well? Or did his own power vanish, inconsequential, against the backdrop of Star’s own light.

Green. The light was green. The power was Star’s own, but wasn’t Wish one of the princess’ spells, at least in part? Wasn’t their own energy alike her own? It did not feel like the version of Wish that Tom had met upon the stairs, or back in his domain, the one who wore the faces of dead friends and foes. Then again, that had only been an aspect of the creature. They had said it themselves… the rest of them was still out there. Perhaps, out here.

Sweat poured from the demon’s skin. A crawling sensation filled the back of his mind. Was this Star? It had to be. It felt like Star. Was this the abomination, the monster that had murdered Moon and half the magic high commission? It could well be.

He didn’t dare call out. He didn’t dare move.

Then, suddenly, the bright light seemed to recede, to implode upon itself. It focused all in one point, a bright emerald star. Briefly it took the form of a grown woman, six armed and six winged. It was impossible to quite make the features through the fog. Then, it drew even thinner, like the slitted-pupil of a reptilian eye. Finally, it closed into nothingness.

Tom was left in darkness. Blinded as his three eyes struggled to adjust once the bright green light gave way to the original dim blue shimmer of the ever present mist.

Just as he was beginning to get accustomed to the illumination once again, a bright orange glow burst alive in front of him. A ball of orange flames, barely the size of his own fist, exploded into existence an arm length in front of his face.

“Hey, dumbo, follow me!” came a high-pitched cry from within the fiery eruption. Then, an instant later, a second explosion showed up, a few meters away from the first. A voice came out from that one as well, a whisper through the fog. “Hurry up! Old meanie is distracted now, but she is going to be back.”

---

Marco still couldn’t believe it. The person leaning against the wall tapestry looked like Silence, but she sounded and moved like Star. Her eyes remained closed, entirely, but that didn’t seem to bother her. She still acted like she could see him. In fact, she had just earlier glanced down straight at the severed head of the statue that probably represented herself, and had even appeared momentarily hurt by the gesture.

“Look, obviously we got off on the wrong foot, Marco,” she sighed. “Like I said, it’s been a while. I guess things have changed a lot more than I thought, and, well, from your perspective, this is all probably pretty sudden, and well… um, is that the demon arm spell again?”

‘That’ has a name. It’s Kar’Margorach, if you must know,” replied Kar, testily.

Star, or Silence, or whoever, turned her head, eyes-closed, towards the tentacle. Not bothering to reply to Kar, she addressed Marco. “Look, I can fix that too. Just, please, wait a little while. I’ll explain things while we wait.”
“Star… is…” Marco was at a loss for words. “… is that really you?”

The girl smiled. “Yeah, Marco, it’s me. Well… I mean, obviously not quite, you know, me. Me proper? Me in person? Me in the flesh? Look, whatever you want to call it. This is me speaking, at least.”

Marco’s mind was a maelstrom of conflicting thoughts and emotions. It was Star. He had found her! Or, she had found him. Except it wasn’t Star. It was Star’s voice coming from the girl that had been helping him. Helping him escape Star’s own spells. Spells that were wrong, somehow. Was she really Star? And, even if she was, could he trust her?

“How?” He asked, not knowing where else to even begin.

“Well, magic, duh!” Silence smiled and Star’s voice chuckled through her. “I really wanted to come see you in person, Marco, I swear! But that’s… complicated, right now. I know this is not ideal, but I needed to talk to you, to make sure you knew that I am ok, that everything is ok… Marco, I am just so happy to see you,” she remarked, as her closed eyes turned with eerie accuracy to look into his own.

“This doesn’t feel ok,” Marco remarked, only half-there, as if he were talking to himself. “I don’t think things are ok.”

“Yeah, I get why it wouldn’t,” Star admitted, looking worried for a second. “Feel ok, I mean. But really, it is ok, Marco. I am here, you are here. It will all be fine if you just let me explain.”

“She was terrified,” Marco observed, flatterly. He was not even really thinking about what he was saying. His brain was still frantically trying to catch up to the scene before him. “Right before you took over, I mean. She seemed afraid for her life. She seemed in pain. Is she alright, Star? Is she in there too?”

He wasn’t quite sure why he was mentioning that now. It just popped into his mind. There were so many things he wanted to say to Star, so many things he needed to ask, so many things he ought to tell her. But, she had said everything was ok. This didn’t seem ok. It seemed wrong, way wrong.

“Who?” Star asked, confused.

It was like the dream all over again, the one he had right before he woke up at the abbey. Alarms were going off inside Marco’s head, and he really really wanted to ignore them. He also knew he shouldn’t.

“Silence,” Marco explained, “the girl you are, um, talking through?”

“Marco, that’s not really important,” Star shrugged off the original question. “The important thing is that you are alright, and that you are here. I really thought… Janna…” she spat the name, dripping with anger. “I saw you fall down into hell, Marco. I thought you had died. I was so happy when I realized you were still alive. Even then, the wait… you wouldn’t believe it… um… you really really wouldn’t. And it turns out I messed up the timing too! But, well, none of that matters, because you are alive, and you are here, and soon we will all be together once more!”

“Star…” Marco’s single human fist trembled, lowered down beside his body. He felt tears welling up inside his eyes. “I missed you too. I also thought you might have died. So, please, answer the question. Please. I want a reason to trust you again.”

He wasn’t sure why he had phrased it quite that way. Why had he said the last part aloud? If he was wrong, it was a cruel thing to say, and, if he was right, well, then it didn’t seem wise, and yet...
“Marco, please calm down,” Star admonished him. Silence’s face took on a slightly annoyed frown. “Look, it’s a bit more complicated than you think. I am sure you had a pretty stressful day as it is, and all. But, well...”

“Stressful!? Star, you sent a fire-breathing warncorn after me!” Marco shouted, angrily. He hadn’t meant to say it like that. He knew Star wasn’t well. He knew he had to be more careful, more tactful. At least until he figured out what the hell was going on. Still, the thought just ignited, like an angry explosion inside his head, then immediately bursted out of his mouth, completely unfiltered.

There was something wrong. Not just with Star, but with him too. This wasn’t how this conversation was supposed to go!

“Uh? Oh, right, right!” Star seemed, well, embarrassed. It was as if Marco had just accused her of eating the last bowl of Captain Blanche's Sugar Seeds, rather than of nearly murdering him. “I guess I did tell it to come fetch you, Marco. But it wouldn’t have hurt you! Or, um, well, not in a way I couldn’t repair now a days… I think...”

“Star, you are not making any sense!” the human protested.

“No, I suppose I am not,” Star sighed. “Some things are really hard to explain at this level. Look, the point is, you aren’t actually hurt, so it all turned out ok in the end. And, well, Marco, you are here! You have no idea how much I…”

“What about Abbot Thorn, then?” Marco blurted out.

“Who?” asked Star, once more seemingly caught off guard.

“The man who was keeping me prisoner here! Who apparently worshiped you as his evil god or something, and who slit his own fucking throat rather than telling me what the hell is going on in here!” he yelled, furious. “He obviously did get hurt. And, again, what about the girl you are currently using as a meat puppet! The girl you keep trying not to tell me that you are hurting just so that we can have this conversation!”

“Um, Marco, are you sure you want to phrase it quite like that?” Kar asked.

“Of course not!” Marco shouted back at the monster arm, powerless to stop himself from talking. “I am pretty sure Star has somehow gone insane in this place. Plus she is, like, even more absurdly powerful than before. Antagonizing her like this is obviously beyond stupid!”

And, yet, that was exactly what Marco was doing. Blurting the first thing that came to mind, the instant it came to mind, without any filter or reservation. It was as if… as if… oh, crap!

Silence, no, Star, cocked her head to the side. “Um, Marco, you… you think I’ve gone crazy?” she asked, sounding hurt.

“Yes,” he answered, because he literally had no other choice.

It was partly Abbot Thorn’s fault. Mostly, though, it was Marco’s own.

All rituals had a cost, after all, the truth ritual included. The price for being able to force another person to tell the truth, was that, at a somewhat random point in the near future, and for an equally arbitrary amount of time, the same effect always rebounded onto the caster.

Right now, Marco could not lie. It was worse than the primary effect of the ritual, actually,
because he couldn’t even hide his thoughts when not asked any questions. He had to speak the truth, the whole truth, every time, until the effect wore off.

It was shocking that he hadn’t realized it earlier. But there had been so much going on, so many thoughts going through his mind, that he hadn’t had the time to blurt all of them out, or even consider why he was always saying quite a bit more than he had intended.

Not that being aware of it now helped him in any way. Shit! It really was the worst possible time. It always was the worst possible time. Perhaps that was also part of the cost of the ritual.

“I think you sound crazy, Star,” he confirmed, truthfully. “I think this place is crazy. I am pretty sure the abbot was crazy. And I think you are crazy if you can act like everything is ok while somehow possessing a terrified mute girl. I think you are crazy if your reaction to being told that someone just killed themselves in your name is saying that it’s ok because the monster you summoned didn’t actually harm me specifically!”

“It was the truth, of course, the ritual demanded it. “At least, I love the version of you I remember, the one I knew, from the day we first met by the water fountain to the day we rode out of hell together. Through dark magic, and Sam, and that green fiery thing that claimed you made them. Through all of that, if you’d asked me, I’d have said that I’d always love you, no matter what, that you’d always be my best friend.”

He took a deep breath. The ritual allowed that. It wouldn’t literally force him to suffocate if he couldn’t spill the beans on everything he was thinking about in one go. But he had to continue. He had to finish saying his part, whether he wanted to or not.

“A thousand questions burst forth from Marco’s mind. Due to the ritual backlash, they all burst forth from his mouth as well, in short order: “You mean you could always take over her? Why
now? Why not before she showed me the exit? Why not a few hours ago, before she warned me about your demon-horse? Why not before Abbot Thorn died?"

“Marco, have you ever tried being in these many places at once?” Star asked back. “It’s unbelievably distracting!”

“Ok, ok, a god is you, we get it!” Kar interjected, before Marco could say anything else. He had wisely kept quiet until now but, the way things were going, it wasn’t as if anything he had to add could truly make things any worse at this point. “But there is a man dead in all this mess, and you haven’t answered yet whether the girl you are wearing like a party costume is going to be fine, nor do you seem to care. I’d say that gives us a lot of reasons not to trust you, while we still have the option.”

Star turned towards the monster arm, somehow glaring at him with closed eyelids.

Kar smiled. Inside his head, Marco heard his voice, sounding a lot more worried than it had sounded aloud just before. ‘Look, kid, time to run. She likes you, not me. So my bet is that the fact that I am still here after pissing her off like that means she can’t actually do anything to us right now. But her army out there certainly can, so, let’s move it!’

“Wait, Kar, no! I need to know if she is really going to kill Silence if we leave!” Damn the stupid ritual! He had only meant to think back that part. Well, no point in trying to retract that now. “Star, is Kar right? Do you really not care if she lives or dies?”

Star sighed. She seemed to regard Marco as if he were being dense. "Marco, look, these people, well, they aren't like you and me. They aren't real. Or, at least, not quite as real."

“What does that even mean?” he asked, confused. “They seem real enough to me!”

“Yeah, I suppose they would. Ugh. Look… I have brought them back before,” Star explained. “Don’t you get it? Back from the dead.”

Marco remembered Abbot Thorn’s story then, about a parent praying to the deity, to Star, for their child to be alive once more. The deity had answered their prayers, but, afterwards...

“Yes, I heard about that, Star,” Marco said, his eyes narrowing in anger. “And apparently you killed a whole town in exchange!”

Despite the borrowed body, so far it had been Star’s own body language, or some variation thereof, that came through in Silence’s expressions. Her responses at least somewhat within the range of how Marco would have expected his best friend to act. This time, however, there was no reaction. No rush to deny it. No surprise at the imputation. No flinching in horror at the idea. Nothing. She just didn’t seem to mind.

Marco realized, for the first time in a fully conscious way, that it was well past time to accept that Star really had changed. She had changed too much for him to reason with her. Kar was right, they had to get out of here.

The human noticed, with relief, that he no longer seemed to need to blurt any of that out aloud. The ritual’s backslash must have worn off, just in time. A small consolation against the terrible certainty taking hold inside his mind.

“Marco, I don’t make the rules,” offered Star, by way of an explanation. Marco wasn’t entirely listening now. He took a step back. “Not all the rules, at least. Not yet. But I can bring them back
to life. So they aren't like us... because... because…”

It didn’t matter. Whatever Star was about to say now wouldn’t, couldn’t, erase the fact that she had murdered a whole bunch of innocent people. Not in a fight, not by mistake, but in a calculated mass execution. Marco was horrified. The thought itself seemed too huge and too foul for his head to contain. Star, his bestie, had... no, something was wrong. It had to be a trick, an impostor, a misunderstanding...

“Because I've tried, Marco, I swear I have!” she protested. “But no matter how many of them I am willing to give in exchange, I... I still can't bring back my mom!”

Her mom? Star was trying to revive Queen Moon!?

“I also couldn't bring you back.” Tears began flowing out of Silence’s still closed eyes. She laughed, then, a bittersweet laugh. “I guess now I know why. And I am happy, Marco, I really am. I am happy that you are alive, even if you hate me.”

“Star! You killed innocents, a whole town of them…”

‘And the deity cut a wound in the sky that rained fire upon the earth and waters. The seas boiled, the mountains trembled, and men were cast out from the serenity of the star-filled heavens’

“... at least one town.” Marco trembled. He was crying as well. He had been crying for a while. “Tell me I got that wrong. Please, Star. Tell me that it’s all some big misunderstanding. I am willing to listen to that, Star, if it’s the truth.”

Silence’s lips kept shut, and for a second it was as if Star had let go of the girl. But the eyes remained closed as well and, thus, Marco had his answer.

“Can’t you really understand why that would bother me!?” he yelled. Anger and desperation forcing him to speak his mind now just as surely as magic had before.

He stepped back, grabbed the backpack firmly, and began to turn around.

Then he realized something. If he left now, he was turning his back on Silence. She was abandoning the girl to Star. He didn’t want to fight his best friend. He couldn’t fight Star. But he also couldn’t abandon the girl who had risked her own life to help him.

“Marco, I told you already, they are not like you or me, they are not mewmans or humans, they aren’t even monsters!” she shouted. “They aren’t fully alive. It’s just like my spells. This place, the whole thing, is artificial. One big spell. Trust me, nothing more.”

“So, basically, assuming we believe you,” Kar retorted, “they aren’t like you or him, but they are like me?”

“I wasn’t talking to you!” Star yelled, her borrowed face turning into a disgusted grimace. “But yes, Marco, it really is no different than that. After all, it never seemed to bother you when cloudy screamed as I dismissed them! Or when I left my narwhals to fade away on land. Or when you killed my warnicorn. What? Did you think there is a magical home inside the wand where spells all go to after they vanish? To live together like some happy spell family or something!? Grow up, Marco! I certainly had to!”

He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to think. He just knew that he didn’t want to be around Star, around this version of Star, anymore.
Marco’s hands moved on automatic, as his mouth began reciting an ancient incantation. The room around them faded into a dim gray, losing all its color just as the forms of the people within it lit up with supernatural brightness. Within the sight of the exorcism ritual, Marco’s body shone crimson red, while both Kar and Silence glimmered with the same violet brightness. In the case of the girl, a tiny white flame seemed to burn inside her chest. Somehow, Marco could see it, despite neither her clothes nor her body being any more transparent than before.

He also saw, behind the mute girl’s closed eyelids, a pair of blue sad orbs looking back at him with a familiar expression. Upon her cheeks, two broken hearts flashed briefly as Marco pushed his open palm forward, driving an ethereal punch into the violet brightness that seemed to be Star’s possession spell.

Nothing happened.

Marco’s own essence, carried through the ritual, hit Star’s form like a leave against a stone wall. It didn’t drive her out of Silence’s body. It didn’t push her back in any way. It didn’t even seem to be able to hold onto her, like it had before with Wish or with the spirit of Crow Temple Mountain.

Star regarded her bestie with a hurt, confused look. “Marco… what are you trying to do?”

As she spoke, the bright violet light seemed to grow brighter and brighter. Not just around Silence, but around Kar as well. The walls, the floor, the air itself seemed suffused with a purple glow.

Marco blinked and the exorcism ritual shattered. The lightshow crashed all around him as gray candles became red once more, and unnatural violet light gave way to a more mundane form of illumination. He turned around, racing towards the trapdoor. He didn’t dare look back, to see if Star was following, or if she was just staring at him still, shocked and hurt.

He hadn’t been able to help Silence. He hadn’t been able to drive Star’s possession away. But he had raised his hand against his best friend, and he had meant it. That changed everything. It made it real, somehow.

----

Tom had spent the last few minutes running around, as fast as he could, pursuing the tiny orange explosions.

They weren’t explosions, not really; more like, well, brief signal fires. It was as if a series of torches were being lit and doused off, one after another, showing him the way. They were there just long enough for him to notice and dash in their direction, then gone before he could blink.

The voice had not said anything else to him. Certainly nothing that would lead the prince Lucitor to trust it. But, well, what choice did he have? If nothing else, it was a less ominous light to follow than that bright emerald glow from before had been, Star’s magic signature or not.

He had run across jagged irregular mountaintops and plunged himself into precipices following the brief orange flames. So far, wherever he followed, there had been just enough solid ground for him to continue. Every so often the next flame appeared far enough that he had to use his own flames to fly to it. But, as long as he reached the same place the burst of fire had shown itself at, he knew he would find safe footing amidst the impenetrable fog.

Eventually, the jumps ceased, and Tom found himself traversing instead a winding road, heading down. The path itself was narrowly nested between two separate solid walls of dark shadowy rock. A sort of hidden pass between two really close mountains in the endless misty ridge.
“Hey, where are we going?” he asked the void.

“Shhh. No talking,” came the answer. “Meanie will hear you.”

The demon prince sighed and resigned himself to continue following the path of floating flames. Step by step, they became rarer, flaring up only as Tom reached an intersection in the downwards path, pointing him left or right, up or down as the case might be. Soon enough, the walls around him were completed by a ceiling above, as the trail bent towards a crack on the mountain wall, which turned out to be the entrance of a cavernous tunnel.

Flame, and a right turn. Flame, and a left. Flame ahead. Flame on the third tunnel. Tom followed the tiny explosions through a maze of burrowing shafts, and a fog so dense that he could barely see walls that were close enough for him to touch. If there was indeed someone outside looking for them, their pursuit would be all but useless, so long as they had missed even one of the flames.

“Oh, big dumbo,” echoed the voice through the cavern walls. “It’s just straight down from here, ok? So make your own light! I am tired.”

Somehow, the voice had felt clearer this time. Like it was coming from a closer point. It had sounded like a child. Like a really bossy child, but a child nonetheless.

Tom was growing annoyed, and quite tired as well. Reluctantly, however, he did as the voice had indicated. His eyes flared red as he lifted his one remaining hand in front of himself, and a ball of infernal flames manifested between his fingers.

He found out, to his surprise, that he could see more than he had expected. Somehow, with the guiding flames flashing so fast ahead of him, and the near total darkness all around, he hadn’t noticed that the fog was actually thinner down here than back in the surface, never mind the ultra-dense miasma near the tunnel’s entrance. The further he descended into the caves, the more that was true.

He walked for what felt like hours.

Just as the place had started to feel like home - an endless subterranean maze where only his flames illuminated the black volcanic stone of the twisting tunnels burrowing like monstrous parasitical tendrils into the dark depths of aeon-forgotten strata inside the guts of a lifeless world… - the tunnel, abruptly, ended.

The demon prince was shaken out of his nostalgia, to find himself entering a huge hall-like cavern. The ceiling rose several meters high, while the space itself stretched dozens in diameter. He knew it must be nestled deep inside the mountain, too, or, perhaps, well below it, into the crust of the earth. It all depended how this world worked, geologically speaking.

The ball of fire in Tom’s hand reflected and refracted upon the endless facets of a giant amber drop in the middle of the cave. Preserved inside the amber was a frozen dragon-like shape.

It had a crocodile snout, bearing long sharp fangs. A pair of leathery wings grew from its sides, frozen in mid flight inside the amber drop. Its skull sported three horns: one over the nostrils and two along the back of the head. The latter curved backwards, somewhat like a pair of handles.

It was small, for a dragon, closer in size to a horse or a griffon. The limbs of the creature were holding on to two spiked wheel-like objects. Its claws seemed almost fused to the disks, and the wheels themselves were covered in reptilian scales just the same as the rest of the creature, as if they were also part of it. They probably were.
Upon its back lay a saddle, and around its neck wrapped a collar, like one would put on a pet. Hanging from the collar was a small metal tag. It read, simply, ‘667’.

“Her name is Nachos, and she is the bestest dragoncycle in the whole wide world,” explained a familiar voice. The voice that had guided Tom here.

It was not the only place he recognized it from, however, now that he had a moment to listen, now that he was close enough to hear it without distortion. Sure, it sounded younger, and it spoke differently, more like a bratty child than a high and mighty sorceress of ancient power. Still, it was unmistakably her.

Baphomet’s hairy balls, Marco had been right after all!

Point Diaz.

Walking slowly around the giant amber drop, the tiny chubby-cheeked form of the Forger of Scissors stepped into view. If he didn’t know any better, Tom would have said she was only eight centuries old, by demon standards.

If she were human, she’d be five.

****

She walked quietly back through the abbey’s courtyard in still unfamiliar legs. Before her, the huge wooden gates of the monastery made to worship her crashed down into the ground, pushed by the hooves of two skeletal warnicorns.

For the second time since he had arrived to her domain, she had let Marco go. She had been, once again, unable to stop him. Well, she could stop him, of course. It was just that, well, she just couldn’t stop him!

An entire world bent to her will, painstakingly rearranged to achieve her true heart desire, and yet, when happiness was finally back within her grasp, she had let it go. She just never had been able to put her foot down when it came to Marco. First she had failed to keep him away, for his own safety, and now she couldn’t get him to stay with her. She was still the same foolish girl, despite it all.

She had been so taken by surprise, so shocked that her bestie - the boy she loved, the one she waited so long for, endured so much for - would try to push her away the way he did, that she hadn’t really had the chance to react. It had been the same as with Jackie, all those years ago.

But still, she had been so sure Marco would be different. So sure that he would understand. He knew her better than anyone. He knew how she felt about him! He knew how hard it had been to deal with what happened to her mom!

She had been sure that, if only she took the time to talk to him, to explain things, to bring him up to speed with the last near century, then he, of all people, would understand her.

She had been wrong.

She had lowered herself back to their level to explain it to them, and neither of them got it!

The spells outside were all bowing down to her now, genuflecting before their creator, reminding her of who and what she was. She extended a single hand towards one of her trees, and it obeyed her call. The petrified wood twisted and turned as if it were alive again. A living animal more than
a living plant - ah, but what an insignificant distinction that was! The roots sprung out from the ground, the branches coiled around each other as if forming a single braid of hair, then the whole thing curved on itself like an oversized candy cane.

The tree continued to shapeshift before her eyes. It curled further upon itself. It grew smaller and smaller, compressing a literal ton of matter into a rod smaller than half her newly acquired arm. It flew towards her hand, where she effortlessly caught it.

The shaping was crude, artless, but it would be sufficient. The tree had taken the form of a scepter with a large circular hole in the middle. It was a rough facsimile of her wand, as it had been the day of her resurrection, back in the devil’s dance hall. It was only missing the centerpiece, the crystal, the…

She held her free hand up, towards the stream or red dots in the night, towards the wound upon the heavens. She plucked down a single red star from the sky, compressed it until it was barely the size of her fist, and finally stuck it inside the rest of the makeshift wand.

Star’s wand.

And yet, that was the opposite from the lesson she had just experienced. From the humiliation she had just received.

She had thought Marco would understand. She had thought that she could make him understand, by slowing down to explain, by making herself small and limited again, by relating to him like he expected Star Butterfly to relate to him.

That hadn’t worked. It hadn’t worked at all.

She had tried being Star.

It was time to go back to being Midnight.

Chapter End Notes

*I think Earth is a...*

Ok, ok, that joke is dead from overuse.

Point is: Hekapoo is alive after all, in a way, and Star is basically the Dark Queen Ascended.

What? You thought I meant ascending to the throne? Ha! Silly you!

Also, yes, I named a chapter of a porn fic after a concept of theological doctrine. I believe it fits, in more ways than one. But I do, in fact, expect the Spanish Inquisition over it..
Coming up next: Chapter 35: Fragments and Pieces
Chapter Summary

In which Marco is sort of a wanker, Tom is unimpressed with Hekapoo’s plan, and our hero tries - and fails - to steal a boat.

Chapter Notes

Yup. That’s the description. Nothing else important happens this chapter. Nothing at all… and that’s why this is the longest Part IV chapter to date ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 35: Fragments and Pieces

“Why are we still doing this?” Marco asked the dark empty void around them.

The long subterranean tunnel, utterly bereft of light, appeared to him as a perfect reflection of the way he now felt inside.

Damn did that sound emo! But it was true! If anything, Marco thought he had a pretty good reason for feeling depressed. After all, he was lost adrift in a strange and broken world where the love of his life had turned mad and now ruled the land as a cruel and inhuman goddess. As far as he was concerned, existential angst was the right and proper reaction to that!

Which led him back to wondering… why where they still doing this?

“Because a mute girl who might or might not be possessed by your ex told us to,” Kar’s disembodied voice replied from somewhere below and to the right. Marco knew where the tentacle arm was. After all, it was connected to him. But, still, he couldn’t actually see him. “Because following the directions she gave us still beats wandering aimlessly along these tunnels until our supplies run out and you die of dehydration. Particularly since I am pretty sure that would kill me as well.”

“That’s not what I mean, Kar,” the human retorted. “What I mean is: what’s the point? We were trying to find Star, right? Well, we found her. So, suppose we make it out from this place… what are we even looking for at this point?”

Despite saying that, Marco still shambled on. It was the default, the path of least resistance. He didn’t move out of conviction, but inertia. It was good that the floor was pretty regular down here, though, otherwise he could not imagine how they would be able to make any forward progress in this darkness - hopeless or not.

“Someone that doesn’t want to kill us would be a start,” replied the tentacle, glibly.
Kar really was carrying the team now, Marco had to admit, and not just in the sense of being the only one of the two who still cared about staying alive in the first place. They were deep underground, far from any exit or skylight, and it wasn’t like either of them was carrying a torch. Marco, personally, was blind as a bat down here. Then again, Kar had never needed eyes to see. Never had them to begin with.

“We just passed another door on the left, by the way, Marco,” he announced. “That makes twenty-two. Only five more before the next turn, by Silence’s instructions.” It was more to fill the empty air than anything else. They both knew Marco would just lose the count again soon enough. Plus it wasn’t like he would able to see the twenty-seventh door.

“She killed an entire town…” Marco remarked.

“So did we, once,” Kar tried to comfort him, in the worst possible way. “A big one.”

“That’s different. Mirria wasn’t on purpose.” Nor had been Xoth’kaul, near Crow Temple Mountain, or any of the other places he and the living spell had brought doom to by mistake. God, why were they even talking about that stuff now!? Marco felt miserable enough as it was! “She… she didn’t even seem guilty about it…” the human pointed out.

“You know what’s interesting?” Kar asked, switching topics as tactfully as he could, which, of course, wasn’t saying much. “These doors are all made of metal. Smooth too. It doesn’t look like any of it was built by the same people as the abbey.”

 Marco sighed. He said nothing for a long while. Finally, he decided that making small talk was better than silently marinating on his own depressing thoughts. “Maybe a different group? Another city or kingdom? Or maybe the abbey was just old?”

“No, Marco, you don’t get it. These are solid flat sheets of metal we are talking about. Perfectly regular. I can barely make the vertical line separating both panels for each door. No handles either. No one from the last time we were here could have built any of this, and these guys seem way more primitive than, say, the maze crafters of Zonst or the holy forgers of the Court of Elesh. The rock itself is pretty smooth too. Just feel the damn ground you are walking on!” Kar was right, it felt more like walking on a concrete sidewalk, back on Earth, than on any natural cavern or stone-carved dungeon the likes of what he had experienced before in Hekapoo’s dimension. “There are also all these long crystal tubes along the ceiling…”


“How am I supposed to know?” Kar retorted. “I was there for all of two days. They don’t look exactly like the glowing glass thingies in your dimension, but for all I know it could just be a different style. They do look pretty busted, though.”

That didn’t make any sense, at all.

“Um, and the doors?” Marco asked, suddenly suspicious. “Are they open or closed?”

“Well, most of them are busted too. Bashed in, sort of,” Kar responded. “A few are still fully closed, though. Those are the ones where it’s hard to find the line between both sides.”

Marco frowned.
“Kar, do you think that Silence, or whoever told her the layout of this place, would be able to tell the difference between those closed smooth metal doors and the rest of the wall?” he asked. “Like, would they know those are doors?”

“Uh… Crap!” swore the monster arm. “Marco, I think my count might be off…”

---

They kept walking for a few more hours after that, but Marco was pretty sure neither of them was too optimistic about their chances of not being utterly lost down here. Eventually, they sat down to rest, and, in Marco’s case, sullenly chew on the salted meat provisions that Silence had given them.

Silence. She had risked everything to help Marco escape, and she had ended becoming a prisoner herself, in the worst possible way. Hell, she might have been killed in the process of whatever Star had done to her, actually. The mute girl certainly seemed to expect that. Marco shuddered at the memory of her dragging a finger along the length of her throat. He shuddered even further at the memory of Abbot Thorn doing the same with an actual knife.

Had Star actually been chatting with him, trying to convince him all was well, while talking through a puppet made from a fresh corpse? Marco felt like he was about to puke. He stopped himself. They didn’t have enough provisions to afford that.

Star…

It seemed like a lifetime ago that Marco been called to guide around that one weird exchange student, unreasonably fascinated by a water fountain. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he had found out that magic was real, that other dimensions were real, that monsters were real. A lifetime since he had somehow made a new best friend over the course of a single amazingly bizarre fight, down by the Stop & Slurp parking lot.

It seemed like a lifetime ago that he had followed Star in secret to Tom’s underworld, worried about his friend, but, also - and he could admit it now - jealous for the girl he hadn’t yet realized he liked. A lifetime ago since their souls were joined by the Blood Moon.

It also seemed like a lifetime ago since she had given up her wand, her most precious possession, in exchange for Toffee letting him go, unharmed. A lifetime ago since she had first followed him here, to Hekapoo’s dimension, to rescue him, to bring him back, after sixteen years on his end and eight minutes on hers.

It didn’t seem so long ago since they had all attended the Love Sentence concert, since he had spoken her name while in bed with Jackie, since he had realized he had feelings for her. It didn’t seem long at all since he had gone back home the day after, and found that Star had locked herself in her room. It hadn’t been long since their first date, that same night.

It also didn’t seem long since the morning after that, in the diner, where they had met up with Jackie, where Jackie herself had pushed Star and Marco to officially become boyfriend and girlfriend, in addition to herself and Marco dating as well. Not long at all since the day when he had felt like the luckiest bastard in all the wide multiverse.

The days that followed that had been the happiest in all of Marco’s life. Likely, they would forever be. He had spend them hanging out with his two best friends, with his two crushes, with the two people he was then growing to love more than life itself. All through that weekend in St. Olga, despite the peril, despite the vampire princess, even despite that awful spell, he was happy. He might not have know it then, but he had been happy.
Then they had come back to find Queen Moon dead, and all had forever since gone to shit.

Except, that wasn’t true. There had been one final moment, one last time, that Marco, that all of them, had been happy. They had been in danger, they had been afraid, and they had thought - boy were they wrong! - that they were mentally preparing themselves for the worst. Yet, they had been happy. That night, the night they all slept together in Star’s room inside Sam’s terrible castle, and the day after, as they made their way out of hell, they had been happy.

The entire multiverse was about to come crashing on them back then, and, on some level, they had known it. But they had been together, speaking frankly to each other, and deeply, hopelessly, blindly, in love. It had made them feel like they were ready to face anything.

He remembered that night. Their last night together. He remembered him and Star making out on Jackie’s command. He remembered making love to Star, one final time, with Jackie smiling at them both as he did. He remembered the three of them kissing, in bed. Star and Jackie too. Then him plunging himself into Jackie as Star cheered them on and spoke naughty nothings at the two of them.

That hadn’t been long ago. It hadn’t been long ago at all. For him, at least, it had barely been over a week.

Marco now could only imagine what could have been, if they had all remained together, if they but had had a few months together after that night, rather than a day. He imagined the three of them out on a date. Maybe back on Earth, by the pier. Maybe in the soft bright pink grass of some bizarre, lovely, amazing, dimension. Laughing, rolling around naked atop one another.

He pictured himself and Jackie hugging Star, holding her tightly and safe, keeping her anchored into well, into humanity, or mewmanity, with their love. He imagined them nibbling at her small, perky, and beautifully sensitive, breasts, as their hands roamed her body. He could remember the feeling of her skin, the smell of her hair, the shape of her inner thighs, the sensation of sliding his fingers through her delicate gossamer wings. He remembered well the curve between her lips. Both kinds.

He pictured that version of Star trembling, not with fear but with pleasure. He imagined Jackie too, smiling at him. He imagined himself reaching out above Star’s lying body, and kissing Jackie’s lips, while both human teenagers drove their mewman girlfriend to orgasm with their ever more frantic caresses.

Marco’s breath became more erratic, out in the real world. His fantasies became more and more vivid. They were not spell induced hallucinations this time, nothing of the sort, just: thoughts, ideas, wild notions. He imagined himself tonguing Star’s cunt. He imagined Jackie doing the same. He imagined both girls taking turns sucking him off, Star pouting and Jackie grinning as the other slid her tongue along the length of his shaft and took it in for a deep sloppy kiss. He felt weirdly guilty about that fantasy, and replaced it with one were he was fucking Star and eating Jackie out. He imagined their faces turning red with arousal, the smell of Jackie in his nose, the weight of a bouncing Star on his lower body, his hands on her hips, on her breasts.

Marco could hear their panting. Jackie, Star, himself. All of them enraptured in bliss together. As it should have been. As it could have been.

He felt himself sliding in and out of something wet and warm, and he imagined that it was Star. In the dark, without feeling his arm, only vaguely aware that he was doing the movement, he was able to lie to himself, if only for a moment. A moment that seemed to extend itself into an eternity.
He thrust wildly into an imaginary and joyful shapeshifter. She was sometimes Star, smiling, innocent, carefree. She was sometimes Jackie, cool, serene, unharmed. Star shuddered with pleasure. Jackie moaned his name. Marco… came.

“Well, just for the record, this is officially the gayest shit you have ever done, and I am counting that one drunken night in the goddamn pirate ship,” Kar remarked, as he slowly uncoiled himself from Marco’s now slowly deflating penis. The appendage shook himself clean and left the human to deal with the rest of that mess on his own.

Now that he was done with that, Marco found that he felt, well, relieved, yes, but also incredibly guilty.

Not just guilty about using his friend as a masturbatory aid. Although, well, that was probably bad too. Not that Kar couldn’t have had easily refused to go along with it, if he had wanted to. Their control over the appendage was shared to some degree, but, in the end, the monster arm called the shots everywhere below the shoulder joint. He wondered if he should have asked Kar anyways. It was probably bad form not to. But he knew his friend well enough to tell that that would have been even more awkward, for both of them.

Even now, Marco sensed more of a feeling of sardonic amusement from Kar’s tone, rather than genuine annoyance. Still, that had been… weird.

Normally, the spell would have retreated below his skin before something like this. But, then again, Kar had already said he couldn’t do that now, that he was unable to re-absorb into Marco’s normal body, for some reason.

Now that he thought about it, absorbed didn’t mean gone, or even unaware. Maybe Kar was always there, on some level?

Either way, as weird as that part was, it wasn’t the main reason Marco felt guilty.

He felt guilty because he had been imagining being happy with Star, who he now knew was insane and a murderer. He felt guilty because he had been imagining himself with Jackie, who was almost certainly long dead.

It hadn’t been long ago at all. That was true, but only from Marco’s perspective.

From either girl’s perspective, assuming they had crossed the portal together after he and Tom fell down, and assuming he could trust anything that Star had said to him, it had been… eighty years? More?

It had been just over one year, between when Star moved to Earth and met Marco, and the night they flew out of hell together. For Marco, that encompassed events that felt like a lifetime ago, and events that happened on the other side of one - admittedly long and traumatic - week. For Star, that time was but a blink, back in the distant memory of her childhood, decades upon decades ago.

She remembered Marco. She remembered that she loved him. But she probably didn’t even remember who she had used to be back then. She had lived for decades in this fucked up dimension, enduring god knows what, prolonging her own life by who knows what sort of dark spell, until even Star broke. Now whatever she was was no longer Marco’s bestie. It was the thing from Cass’ goddamn prophecy - ‘the dark queen ascending’, whatever the fuck that meant!

As for Jackie… well, she was probably over ninety-five years old and human. More likely than not, she had long passed away.
Still on his knees, without bothering to pull his pants back up, alone in a darkness so complete that he couldn’t see his own hand, Marco began to sob. A soft whimper at first. But, like a dam bursting open, he soon found himself crying and wailing, snot running down his nose as he punched the ground with his left hand. This time around, his right arm refused to move.

“I stand corrected…” Kar sighed. “…_this_ is the gayest shit you have ever done.”

“Kar… can you…” Marco sobbed. “… I don’t want to do this anymore. Can you, um, take over? You made me promise, a long time ago, I think… I don’t remember it well enough, but… I think… I promised you a body of your own… Could you just take over mine and let me… let me be gone?”

There was a long pause. Marco felt the tentacle arm clench and unclench below him.

“So… that’s it? You just give up!??” Kar asked, annoyed. There was a tone of distaste and disappointment to its voice now, far more serious than any of its earlier recriminations. “Ten days here and you can’t handle it anymore? Fuck! I can’t believe it! You are even more of a wimp now than you were the first time around!”

“That’s not it, Kar!” Marco protested. “There is just nothing for me to even give up on anymore. There is no scissor quest this time around. There isn’t even going back home to Echo Creek to be with Star and Jackie.”

Marco punched the even stone floor again, hard. Pain shot from his knuckles, all through the length of his human arm. For a moment he wondered if he had broken his hand. He then remembered that he didn’t care.

“We _found_ Star,” he explained. “She’s gone evil like that stupid prophecy said she would. I didn’t believe it back then, and I certainly don’t want to believe it now. But it’s true… isn’t it? I see no way for her to go back to normal. I see no way Jackie is alive either, not after eighty goddamn years! So, what’s left to fight for? Staying alive? Here? Without scissors? Until when? Tell me: what’s the plan? Why should I bother getting up from here? What’s the goal this time, Kar?”

Because that’s what had made enduring those sixteen years possible, the first time around. They had always had a goal: go back home, get the scissors, catch Hekapoo, _anything_!

“How about finding Tom?” Kar pointed out. “Don’t you owe him that much, at least, after he saved you from falling to your death?”

“Yes, but…”

“How about seeing your parents again? You think they aren’t worried about you?” the monster arm added, as Marco trailed off. “Didn’t you _promise_ you’d be back safe?”

“I…”

“How about, I dunno, the entire population of Earth and Mewni, who might very possibly die if you just give up right now?”

“Wait, what!?” Marco asked, surprised.

“Do you even remember what Star said? What she told us Sam told her? Or does your memory of that night only work for events involving getting your dick wet?” Kar asked
annoyed. “Sam is going to destroy Earth and Mewni, unless…”

“… unless Star stopped Wish,” Marco completed the sentence. “But, well, she did! Back in the stairs. She killed…”

“… an aspect of the creature,” Kar continued. “We both know that wasn’t the end of it! The thing itself said as much.”

“How do you even know all this?” Marco asked, trying to pull away from the direction the conversation was taking. Did that mean Kar had been trapped inside his arm, observing everything that was going on since… since when, exactly?

“Since right before you arrived to Dis,” the monster arm replied, not to the human’s words but to his thoughts. He could hear both, after all. “I awoke on that weird hearse-like carriage thing. Janna was just setting off a fireball before our noses. Well, your nose, technically, but still…”

Wait. Back on the way to Sam’s castle? That didn’t make much sense. Why then? Marco tried to recall what had happened that night, to figure out if there was something he could remember that had anything to do with Kar.

They had gone into the underworld. Wish had been after Janna. Star, Jackie, and him had all tried and failed to stop the fiery phantasm. Tom had managed, somehow - because he was inside his place of power or something like that, his… dominion, was it? Then they had all departed for Dis, for Sam’s castle, with Tom still unconscious from the fight, and Star riding atop the hearse, and he and Janna had been at the front and…

He had seen a creature, a tentacled monstrosity the size of a building flying around. It had reminded him about Kar, he realized. But, well, that wasn’t it. Was it? It couldn’t possibly have been that simple.

Then, it clicked. Marco and Janna had been talking about magic. Right before she had shown off her fireball, he had been in the process of his own demonstration: he had shown her one of the rituals.

The finding ritual! That was it! Marco had asked for strength. He thought he had gotten nothing in return, or perhaps just that dream about the fierceness ritual. But, instead, he had gotten…

“Me,” Kar reacted directly to his thoughts again. “Makes sense. Strength to kick your mopey sad butt up and get you back to being a fucking hero or whatever.”

“Kar,” Marco reminded him, “a ‘hero’ is just an idiot with a death wish…”

“Whatever, kid. Either way you have both of those covered,” Kar retorted. “Let’s at least die doing something useful!”

“Sam seemed to be saying that Star was the only one that could take on Wish without his interference,” Marco pointed out.

“Yeah, that asshole ‘seemed to be saying’ a lot of things. Those never turned out like we expected them to, did they?” The spell countered.

“Well, what makes you think that Star isn’t taking care of the problem? That she hasn’t already done so? She kept saying that everything was alright, that she had fixed things,” Marco argued. “She has certainly changed a lot, I am not debating that, but she still wants to bring her mom back. I
find it hard to believe that she would be ok with Mewni being destroyed… with her dad dying…”

“Maybe,” Kar agreed. “But are you really going to put your trust on the same person we were talking to? The one who saw nothing wrong with murdering entire towns of people? Who couldn’t really understand why you even felt differently about it?”

“No,” Marco said. He whipped the tears away from his eyes. “No, I can’t. We need to figure out what’s going on here. We need to know if Wish is still active, and destroy them if they are. While we are at it, we need to make sure Tom is alright. We need to find out if Jackie is still alive. Janna too. And then we will figure out some way to help Star see reason again!”

In the darkness, Marco couldn’t actually see Kar’s toothy grin spread along his arm, but he could feel it.

“Now that’s the unfounded idiotic optimism I was looking for!” the tentacle exclaimed. Kar paused then, pensive. “Any ideas where to start, though? Because, frankly, I got nothing…”

Marco gave their situation some thought. Now that he had a goal, and had gotten the initial shock of his conversation with Star out of his system in, um, multiple ways, the whole thing didn’t look quite as hopeless as before. It was still pretty fucking hopeless, though.

“Only two,” Marco sighed. “When interrogating Abbot Thorn, he said something about ‘air raiders’ opposing Midnight, right? We could find those.”

After all, those words had been spoken in Riradesh, so the finding ritual would work there.

“Ok,” Kar agreed. “That’s one.”

“The other… um, well, we already know the finding ritual won’t help us there, but it is the reason we came here to begin with,” Marco pointed out. “It’s the reason I got the finding ritual again, why I started getting the memories back, I think. Before it became about finding Star, or even about saving Earth and Mewni. Before we found out that we even had to cross through hell to get here.”

Marco remembered that first dream quite clearly: the forest on fire, the impossible smoke, flying down following the finding ritual. He had had the same physical age he did now, the same body, but he had felt so different back then. He had felt invincible. He had felt sure there was a way to fix it all, even as he listened to the most powerful being he knew explain that she had fought, and lost, and mostly died.

“She said there were two aspects, ‘one to explain, the other to reveal a worthy ally’. I am pretty sure that one was the ‘explaining’ Hekapoo,” Marco reasoned. “So, we need to figure out if there really is another fragment of her still around somewhere: the one to reveal an ally. We need all the help we can get, after all. And, if we do find Hekapoo, even just one of her clones, well... she would know what to do.”

----

“So, that’s your plan? We just wait in here!?” exclaimed Tom, incredulous, at the pint-sized mistress of dimensional travel.

He was sitting down on the rough stone floor of the deep cavern. Before him was Hekapoo. Or, well, this version of Hekapoo: a young child with two minuscule fangs sprouting out of her upper lip and tiny baby-goat-like yellow horns cradling a flame that seemed all out of proportion with her smaller head and body.
Her bright red hair was still quite long, yet somewhat shorter compared to that of the grown-up edition. It reached down only to her waist, rather than hanging near the ground. The absolute distance was, of course, even shorter. She was wearing a much simpler version of her usual orange and yellow dress, one that actually had shoulder straps and a straight cut at the lower end, just above her ankles. In her white furry hand, she held an orange handle connected to a pair of safety scissors.

“I told you already! Meanie will find us anywhere else,” Hekapoo protested, crossing both arms in front of herself and frowning. “We have to hide.”

That wasn’t the answer the demon prince had expected. He had hoped that the member of the Magic High Commission would have a plan of action, that she’d known exactly what to do, to find everyone, to set things right. Turns out that her plan was for him to be trapped down here with her, rather than lost out there alone. He wasn’t even sure if that was an improvement or not.

“And then what? Do we just stay here until the damn rock crumbles to dust around us?” protested Tom, standing back up and walking straight towards the girl. “How long do we need to stay down here?”

Hekapoo recoiled back from him, and the demon prince realized he must have had let his annoyance show through more than he’d thought. He closed his eyes, on the off chance that they had been just glowing bright red. Hekapoo or no Hekapoo, he didn’t like going all aggro, especially on a child.

“I… I don’t know…” Hekapoo answered, hesitantly. She seemed sad all of a sudden, turning her gaze down, averting her eyes from Tom’s. “It’s all I could think of doing, since, since I became… like this… I know I should be able to do more, that I should know better… there is no point to me if I can’t, but I don’t see how…” She sniffled.

“Ok, ok, calm down. I am sorry,” Tom sighed. “I, well, I am not used to this. I keep thinking I am talking to… well, you know. Do you remember what it was to be, um, an adult?”

The Hekapoo child made a face. “Ugh. Of course not! Ew!”

Tom blinked for a second, then he winced, horrified. “Argh! That was so not what I meant!”

“Sure it wasn’t! Poo-head!” Hekapoo stuck her tongue at him.

“Look,” Tom massaged his forehead with two fingers as he tried to better explain what he was trying to ask. “I just meant… You know you are Hekapoo, right? And that there was a grown-up version of you? How much of the stuff she would have known do you also know?”

The child Hekapoo seemed flustered for a moment, unsure of what to say. “Yes. I mean no. I mean: some. I… mmm…” She frowned, as if concentrating. “Let me try and explain it, alright? But it’s a bit complicated, and I am not used to putting it in words. So, don’t interrupt!”

Tom nodded.

“Basically, old Hekapoo was this big big bag full of… stuff. Memories, mostly. But also thoughts, and facts, and magical… stuff. She got trapped. But there was a… a… hole? A window?” the kid frowned. “Anyways, she could only get part of herself through it. So she sent a recording to her, ugh, ‘ex-boyfriend’, and then she sent me. But she had to pick what to send, and her… her memories? Ugh, it’s a bit more than that. Her, um, things that happened to her, but also her learnings and built reactions. Her…”
“Life experiences?” Tom suggested.

“I told you not to interrupt!” Hekapoo pouted. “But, yeah, those. They weren’t the most important. So she patched me together without a lot of that. Hence why I look young.”

Also why she acted young, Tom thought, but didn’t say. It made sense, if Hekapoo had to cherry pick which memories to keep - or to feed her clone, or whatever - she would probably choose learning to walk and use the potty before the details of the latest MHC meeting.

The demon prince began pacing around, lightly massaging the shoulder above his aching stump with his remaining hand. He was walking around the huge amber drop, and the dragoncycle encased within. ‘Nachos’ is what Hekapoo was said this one was called. Why did the name sound so familiar?

“But I remember some things,” the child continued. “The important stuff: the battle, and how stuff works, and old meanie, and the other kid we have to save.” Then Hekapoo made a face. “And a bunch of weird stuff about old me’s girlfriend for some reason! Ew. Gross!”

Wait! Hekapoo had a girlfriend? The Lucitor prince thought, surprised. Not the time, Tom supposed. “Which kid that we need to save?” he asked, instead, turning back around to face the child.

“The Star kid, duh!” Hekapoo Jr. replied, like the demon was being unbelievably obtuse. “Except we are too late for that now, of course, and anyways we can’t leave here.”

‘Too late’? The demon prince wondered if she meant Star was hurt or… he winced. Then he remembered the skeleton unicorn monstrosity. No, Star was alive, she must be. But, then, what did Hekapoo mean by ‘too late’?

“Wait. That’s the part I don’t get. The bit about not being able to leave,” Tom protested. “You have dimensional scissors! We could go to Mewni, to the underworld, get help…”

Hekapoo sighed. “The scissors all broke when older me was fighting. I just made these myself.”

“So?” Tom asked. “They are still dimensional scissors, no? Those are the ones you used to portal me out of the petrified forest, right? … Um. Thank you, by the way… I don’t think I got to say that, yet, so, um, thank you. But, well, why can’t we just use those?”

Hekapoo frowned, she looked down again and stood there silent for a moment. A few seconds after, Tom saw her lift the back of her arm to clear away the tears from her eyes. “They aren’t as good, ok? They only work in her home… old me’s. They go between the three, um, scissor-places… um, dimensions, I guess… but only those in her home. Most of it is not even my home anymore… and so sometimes they don’t even work well there either. They can see us out there too, in most places. Because… because it’s their home now…”

Their home? Who’s home? Tom tried to parse all that, only somewhat sure he understood.

“So, you are saying that the scissors only work where Hekapoo used to… live?” Tom asked. The kid sniffled and nodded. The demon prince walked towards her and, awkwardly, knelt down and put his one remaining hand around the shoulder of the powerful sorceress. “Shush... It’s ok. It’s ok. That’s not your fault, alright?”

Hekapoo’s ‘home’. Did she mean Hekapoo’s domain?

So, she was saying that the scissors worked all over Hekapoo’s former domain? If so, that meant
that they were still within it and, by implication, that time was still flowing at a faster rate than it
did on Mewni. He wasn’t sure if that was good news or bad.

Tom remembered the three spheres floating in the map room: three separate dimensions inside the
same flow of time and the same domain, Hekapoo’s domain. Maybe the forest was in one and the
foggy mountain range in another? Maybe those two were just part of the same huge connected
world and there were two other worlds nearby? Either way, the scissors could take them between
those two places, and between those three dimensions that formed the domain of the Forger of
Scissors - just not outside.

There was another problem, though. She had said this wasn’t her home anymore. If Tom was right,
it meant that the full place was no longer Hekapoo’s domain. That was… worrying. It meant, at the
very least, that some other being had claimed it for itself. Old meanie? Whatever that was?
Something else?
The demon prince knew just enough about domains and their masters to understand their
predicament. Tom himself was able to vaguely sense anyone traveling within the hell under his
rule as long as he himself was in residence, with only a few exceptions. His power within the
Lucitor domain had been far from absolute, though, and his mom and grandpa Relicor could do
tings there that he barely understood. It explained why Hekapoo was so insistent they would be
found out if they left this cave. It, and maybe some of the fog above, was probably among the blind
spots. Maybe Hekapoo still ruled this area, maybe it was unclaimed, maybe ‘old meanie’s’ right of
domain was tenuous still. Tom hoped it was the later. After all, sensing intruders was hardly the
only boon granted to the master of a domain.

----

Marco and Kar had fallen asleep nearly instantly after they had finished planning. The next day,
they were back to walking alone through the dark tunnels below a world that perhaps still seemed
doomed, but maybe, just maybe, wasn’t.

Not knowing if Silence’s original count included the closed doors or not, they could no longer rely
on the map Kar had memorized. Besides, now that he was thinking straight, Marco soon figured
out an even bigger flaw in their initial plan. Namely, that their escape route had been planned for
them by the same person - in a manner of speaking - who was now chasing them.

Did Star know everything that Silence knew? Could she read her mind? Was there even a mind to
read there anymore?

Marco lifted up his fist to his mouth, muttered the long incantation and extended his index finger
forward. He made a swift flowing multi-pronged stroke, like the path of a leaf swung by the
breeze. Wind. He followed it with a sharper glyph: ‘weapon’ as the base form, modified with two
separate branching strokes. Attacker. He enclosed the writing so far into a third shape, flowing
uninterrupted from the first two, as was usual in the ancient script. It denoted a group or collection.
That triplet of symbols was his best guess, based on the spoken form, for how the spoken name of
the air raiders could be rendered in the flowing script of Riradesh. So far, all seemed to indicate
that such guess was correct.

In the end, they knew far too little about how the sort of possession they had just witnessed
worked, so they had to assume the worst. Whatever Star was doing to Silence, it wasn’t far fetched
to imagine that it was similar to Kar’s own control over his right arm. Kar could certainly hear
everything Marco was thinking. So, the safe path that Silence had picked for them? Well, it was
almost certainly not safe any more. Not if they truly wanted to evade Star’s grasp.
The drawn phrase that Marco had created in midair folded into itself. For the third time that day, the continuous composite glyph became a bright glowing sphere of white light. The boy in the warrior body took a deep long breath and lunged forward, just as the magical comet of the finding ritual began racing ahead of them.

He knew it was impossible for them to catch up to it. Still, the longer they could keep up, the higher the chance that it would show them another turn, another door they had to go through instead of past. Even if that wasn’t the case, the longer they could keep up, the more ground they could cover without risking having to backtrack.

At least, when the ritual was active, Marco could see a little bit of the tunnel around them. Kar had been right, it seemed far too well constructed for anyone he had ever met in Hekapoo’s dimension. It looked to Marco more like the kind of tunnel one would find inside a subway station, the ones you’d use to switch from one line to another, except, obviously, much much longer.

The long glass tubes in the ceiling definitely looked like some sort of light bulbs too. They reminded Marco of long fluorescent tubes. They were wider, though, oval-shaped instead of cylindrical, and seemingly embedded perfectly into the tunnel stone. Alien light bulbs, turned off. Not that there were any electrical switches around as far as Marco could tell. No wires, either. At least, none he could spot while racing past the strange bulbs.

Examining the fixtures closer was out of the question, of course, as their only source of light was currently zooming ahead of them, at a speed just above that of the fastest galloping horse.

They had resolved to keep usage of the finding ritual to a minimum. Thus, Marco had come up with the clever idea of following it until they lost sight of it, then continuing in the same direction for ten more doors or so - usually about a three hours march - or until they hit a dead end. In their former case, they would cast the ritual again. If it kept going forward, then all was good. If, however, the spell doubled back the moment they cast it, or if they ended up hitting a wall, then, well, they would go back five doors and try again, then two (in whichever direction the ritual picked), then one, if need be. Kar had made it a point to remind him, multiple times, that the only reason that worked at all, was because the monster arm could count the doors in the dark.

The dazzling white meteor disappeared in the distance, past two more doors. They were closer together than was usual.

“Ok, the next two don’t count,” Kar noted. “Then I start from one again, correct?”

Marco nodded, paused to catch his breath, and then began leisurely walking forward in the darkness. They spent most of their time like this, conserving his energy for the next ritual casting and the corresponding sprint.

So far, they had only had to backtrack once, then follow the finding ritual through a polished metal door that had been smashed open, and down three flights of stairs.

The periods between casting the finding ritual were claustrophobic. There was something profoundly unsettling about not being able to see your own hand, even as you knew you were waving it an inch from your nose. He had been far too despondent to care last night, but now the endless march in the darkness was beginning to become a noticeable privation. Not that Marco cared enough to risk losing any more old memories than those he was spending already, of course.

“Kar, I’ve been wondering, what do you remember, from before, about how the finding ritual works?” Marco asked. He only had the memory from the dream to go by, after all. Kar likely remembered years of them using it.
“You mutter a bunch of crap, draw a cave painting in mid air, and it produces a bullshit guiding flare that tries its best to lose you before you learn anything more than the general direction,” Kar responded, deadpan. “Have you already forgotten how it was from fifteen minutes ago?”

“Not that part, smartass!” Marco protested. “I mean the memory loss thing. Is there any way to know what sort of things I am forgetting? Does it only affect my own mind? Or do we both forget at the same time? Maybe you could keep repeating a list of things, and if I don’t remember one of those, then we’d know what I forgot…”

Despite their precautions, he had been using the ritual plenty of times already, and they’d likely would still need to do so a few more times before they were out of here. It wasn’t even clear that they wouldn’t need it just as much afterwards, either. He still remembered the plan: find the air raiders, learn more about Star - or Midnight, or whatever - then find out what had happened to Tom, Jackie, and Janna. So, at least, he hadn’t forgotten that.

He double checked that he remembered Hekapoo too. Although, now that he thought about it, if there had been one more person, and they both had forgotten, then how would he even know about it now? How did you double-check your own memories? What if he hadn’t forgotten a person, but something else they needed, some other part of their already vague and fragile plan?

What if he had forgotten that he had been writing everything down before, to double check? That seemed like the kind of idea that would occur to him. After all, it had just occurred to him, so it certainly was that kind of idea. In fact, he would almost certainly have thought of it earlier than this! So, that meant the fact that he didn’t remember thinking of doing that before must mean he had forgotten the last time he had, and…

“Actually, you just aren’t half as clever as you think you are, Marco,” Kar was happy to reassure him. “I am pretty sure this is the first time you have come up with that particular plan, actually. Besides, you have nothing with which to write, which is why I didn’t bring it up when I thought of it.” Marco could feel the tentacle arm’s smugness inside his own mind. “As for me reciting the sum total of your knowledge back to you? Sure, sounds doable. Let’s start with ‘adjectives that apply to Marco Diaz, in alphabetical order’: addlebrain, ass, asshat, asshole, assw…”

“Ok, ok, I get it!” Marco frowned. Despite the irritating delivery, Kar’s point was obvious: if he didn’t know what he had forgotten, even if Kar remembered it, then there was no way for them to figure out what is was, except by accident. Even just comparing the names of the people they both knew would take forever…

“Well, we already have a bunch of those written down on your back,” Kar reminded him.

Marco blinked - which, granted, did jack shit in total darkness, but such is the force of habit. He wasn’t surprised about his tattoos. He remembered those. He had made a point, back the first time he was here, of tattooing the name of those around him who had died because of his own mistakes. It wasn’t a complete list, not by a long shot… but it was a way for him to remember the people he should never forget.

And yet… he actually had forgotten most of them.

He remembered Allion, Toza, and a handful others. The rest were gone from his mind, washed away the moment he stepped back through the portal towards Echo Creek, sealed away with the rest of his memories from those sixteen years. Maybe one day he would dream about them, and a
meaningless scribble in his shoulders would become a tear-inducing memory? It was a strangely disquieting thought.

“Right. But that’s the point. You have forgotten people in the past, Marco,” Kar pointed out. “You have lost memories before too, separate from that, without magic or rituals or seals. It’s part of how brains work, how time works. I am not saying that we shouldn’t be careful with the finding ritual. But, unless you are terribly unlucky, you are more likely to forget about some random Earth celebrity you once heard of than about, say, your parents.”

Marco quickly checked that he still remembered his mom and dad. He also, for that matter, remembered at least Mackie Hand and Justin Towers. There was a comforting sound to Kar’s argument, but, well, “are you sure that’s how it works?”

There was something about the way in which the downsides of the rituals tended to manifest themselves that didn’t seem quite like random chance. After all, what were the chances of the truth ritual rebounding on him just as Star showed up? Just to mention a recent example.

“Of course I am not sure, but…” Kar trailed off. A second later, Marco heard him continue speaking, not aloud, but inside his own head. ‘Quiet. Something isn’t right.’

‘What is it?’ Marco thought back. He didn’t have to do it. Surely Kar could read the confusion directly off his wordless thoughts. Still, forming the question in his head was his first instinct.

His second instinct was to crouch down, bring both arm and tentacle in front of himself, and prepare to quickly cast the fierceness ritual if needed.

‘There is something dark all around us,’ Kar thought at the human.

‘Kar, it’s pitch black down here,’ Marco thought-observed. ‘It’s always dark around us!’

‘No, you dumbass. It’s dark for me too now.’

Wait. What!? That made no sense. Kar didn’t have eyes. He could see, but he saw the same way Star’s skeleton unicorn flew, or the way Silence coughed without noise. He saw without light because physics didn’t even come into it. So him seeing darkness around them meant… what exactly?

Before Marco could give the issue any further consideration, the chattering started. All at once and from every direction: a chorus of strange echoing whispers, unnatural voices that seemed at once to be murmuring right into Marco’s ear, and yet so very far away.

“Hello? / Hello! / Hello.” “Hello our (beloved / elder / sinuous!) brother” “We are... (glad / surprised / overjoyed / hungry! / happy) to (finally) meet (you)”

“Um,” Marco glanced around nervously. It was quite pointless in the dark. “Who’s there?”

“Marco (Diaz!)” “You (know / met / saw / fought (with / near)) (me / us).” “We (salute / remember / smell! / welcome) you (as well)”

The voices often talked together, starting off as an eerie echoing choir, but then completed the same phrase in different ways, splitting into a cacophony of sounds that, somehow, Marco could still understand. Well, understand was maybe an overstatement. He could make out the different sentences, but not gain too much information from them, really. Apparently, the voices in the dark knew him? They claimed he knew them too, that he had met them, that he had fought with them or,
perhaps, near them.

He wondered at Kar what they looked like.

‘A whole fucking cloud of nothingness, actually.’ Kar thought back, covering with flippant irritation what Marco knew was deep worry. Then, out loud, “Who, and what, are you? Actually, how about we start with ‘what?’”

“Others / family / demons! / friends.” “A ((dark / new) spell) (like / younger than! / greater than!) you.” “Your sibling(s)” “Her (mistress’ / Star’s / Midnight’s? (yes! / perhaps...)) children”

Ok, Marco hoped Kar was doing a better job keeping the many voices straight in its head, because he certainly couldn’t. Still, he had gotten the important part. Marco begun reciting the invocation of the fierceness ritual. If this thing was indeed one of Star’s spells, then, given what they had already seen back at the abbey, they had better be ready for a fight.

“We (mean you no / won’t / haven’t) harm(ed) (you (yet!))” “She (needs / wants / craves!) you (alive / in (mostly) one piece) (both!) (debatable…)” “You (can’t / won’t) (win / escape / fight) (me / us / the swarm)”

Wait. The swarm? As in…

‘Um, Marco, I don’t want to alarm you, but this thing all around us? Not empty any more… well, not, per se,’ he heard Kar’s thoughts in his mind. ‘It has eyes, and claws, and fangs. It has tentacles that make me feel like a goddamn earthworm. Plus, there are a few things in there that I only really know how to describe in ancient infernal languages, and one or two I can’t even name at all. So, actually, you know what? Now that I think about it, I think I do want to fucking alarm you!’

That confirmed it. Marco felt his blood run cold.

There was only one spell that matched that description. A recent one (‘newer than’, ‘greater than’, both made sense now…). One which Star had only created after Moon’s death. One that Marco had seen her use only twice: once against Wish, and once again Sam. Both times, it had been rather ineffective, but that was cold comfort. After all, Marco was infinitely more fragile than either of the spell’s previous targets.

The image of a thousand monstrous mouths ripping the flesh from his bones assaulted the human’s mind. He forced himself to complete the fierceness ritual, not so much because he thought he could win that fight, but because the anger that the ritual provoked as a side effect was a pretty good antidote to the growing sense of crippling terror building within him. A terror that was almost certainly the only natural and sane reaction to finding yourself surrounded by - and conversing with - anything that went by the name of ‘Devouring Horrors Hell Swarm’.

“We (can) (sense / see / smell!) that” “Your (weak / old / feeble) magics” “(Insignificant / meaningless / hopeless) against that of our (mother / goddess / creator)” “You (can’t / shouldn’t! / won’t) defy her (will)” “She (owns / misses! / loves / shall have) you.”

Marco felt his heart pumping, his muscles tensing, adrenaline flooding his bloodstream, and with it, the magical force of the ritual. He assumed a battle stance by reflex. It was pointless. The ritual told him to fight, or to flee. It urged him to take action against the foul creature around him. But what remained of his thinking mind knew all too well that he would lose that fight in a second,
ritual or not. As for escaping...

“Why (Why! / Why?) do you ((let him) disobey mother / are not (like us / loyal / normal))?”
“You are (as / one of / like) us.” “Her (servant / extension / creation).”

It took Marco, with his head thoroughly fogged by the fierceness ritual, a moment to realize that the voices weren’t talking to him. They were addressing Kar. They were wondering why Kar wasn’t siding with Star. It wasn’t entirely an unreasonable question. After all he was one of her spells too.

“I guess it’s simply that I am my own person,” Kar responded to the other spell aloud. “Kind of ironic, when you think about it, I guess.”

“A (delusion / sacrilege / lie! / impossibility)” “You (must / will / won’t?) bring him (back where he belongs / to her)”

The other spell just didn’t know how long it had taken for the monster arm to develop a conscience, though, and Marco doubted Kar would give that up any time soon. But that was a reflection for another time. Right now, the human had more pressing issues to think about, like how to escape a magical swarm of infernal horrors…

Wait. They were asking Kar to bring Marco to Star? Why? Why not do that themselves? Surely he was within their grasp. Marco took a step forward, and, surprisingly enough, felt no appendage rise to hold him back. There was no barrier, physical or otherwise, set to obstruct him. No phantasmal claws or fangs sank into his flesh, either.

Well, it wasn’t like the reason mattered too much to him at this moment. Marco kept walking, and realized that the spell gibbering in the dark was still not stopping him. No force prevented his movement. Soon, he broke into a run, racing away as fast as he could. He rushed forward with all the extra strength of the fierceness ritual. Muscles that could crush diamonds moved his legs at superhuman speeds, driven by a heart that could beat a thousand times per minute. Marco wasn’t quite faster than a speeding bullet, but he was certainly faster than any other natural creature made of flesh and blood.

Unfortunately, Devouring Horrors Hell Swarm’s concern with flesh and blood was merely dietary. The spell itself was made of something quite different, and no matter how fast Marco ran, the voices followed him and the tentacle arm, calmly muttering their endless admonitions towards Kar.

“You (should / must / have to (be the one to)) do it” “We can’t (leave / (stop / deliver) him)” “He would die (of dehydration / without his flesh! / of terror / in but a short while)”

Kar wasn’t answering, and neither was Marco, they were both running as fast as they could, as far away as they could. It wasn’t that the tentacle arm was instrumental to the process but, at some point, it apparently had decided that there was no point in him drawing energy away from their shared body. Even with the excess of vitality brought forth by the fierceness ritual, Marco could use every drop of it for fleeing the, surprisingly chatty, swarm.

“We (can’t / mustn’t /shan’t) go further.” “We (don’t / can’t) understand you (brother)” “You (still / won’t / can’t) escape.” “You are (but / only) ((delaying / postponing) the inevitable / causing her (more / further) grief).”

‘Um, Marco, it stopped following all of a sudden,’ Kar thought to him a moment after. ‘Not that you should stop running, though.’
Marco had no plans to!

“*She will (find / forgive / have) you...*” came one last eerie distant whisper, and, after that, nothing.

Kar and Marco kept running, their heart nearly bursting open with every explosive rushed beat. His super-powered muscles felt not only sore, but close to spontaneous combustion just from the internal friction between the strands caused by their inhumanly fast movement. Without magical aid, his bones would have quickly been ground to powder under the pressure. Even *with* magical aid, the pain caused by such unnatural strain was beyond excruciating.

Hours later, when the ritual’s effect finally faded, Marco quite literally collapsed to the ground. He fell asleep almost immediately. If, next morning, the finding ritual told them they had overshot their turn, then the finding ritual could go get stuffed!

He still didn’t know why that spell - that particular spell, out of the lot of them! - had let him go. Why had it refused to follow them past some arbitrary point, even though it obviously could keep pace with them quite easily? Why hadn’t it tried to hold them? Even if Star didn’t want Marco to be harmed (and a bang up job she had done conveying *that* instruction to the skeletal warnicorn back at the abbey...), what prevented the swarm from just capturing him and bringing him to her?

And why was it down *here* to begin with?

----

“Seventy-Three and Fifty-seven,” announced Kar out of nowhere. Then, responding to Marco’s unspoken question: “That’s the current door since we went down the stairs. We just passed it. The Seventy-third door in total since we’ve been walking in this direction, and the fifty-seventh counting only doors that are already smashed open.”

“Wait, you’ve been keeping track?” asked Marco incredulous. “Since we came down the stairs? So, you were counting even as we were running for our lives?”

Kar chuckled. “I’d love to say I was able to keep my wits better than you did back there. Hell, maybe I did! But, honestly, my brain just works differently from your human skull-meat. I can be both shitting my pants in terror and keeping perfect track of my surroundings!”

If Marco had learned that about Kar, during the first sixteen years here, he had yet to remember it.

“Except, of course, I don’t wear pants,” Kar corrected himself.

“And, um, you don’t shit, either;” Marco pointed out, unsure. “Do you?”

He felt Kar grin. “Goes straight into your digestive system, kid.”


“Oh, don’t worry, not like *that,*” the tentacle explained. “Separate stomachs connected to the same intestines. Mine goes where yours goes.”

That was… less comforting that the monster arm seemed to think it was. Marco felt a rumble in his stomach at that. It probably was just him feeling suddenly conscious about the physical component of having a demon parasite attached.
“First, I find that offensive! I am pretty sure we are symbiotic, given the amount of times I have saved our literally-shared behind. Second, that was just hunger. Neither of us has eaten in hours, and you finished the provisions this morning,” Kar retorted. “And… wait! Seventy-Four and Fifty-eight!”

“Uh?” Marco asked dumbly, surprised by the sudden topic change.

“The doors. We reached the next one,” Kar explained, exasperated. “Now, I want to test something. Do the finding ritual again.”

Marco sighed. He could ask why, but that would just lead to the demonic tentacle throwing him another smug and condescending half-answer. Truth was, he trusted Kar. He was an asshole, but not the kind of asshole that would ask him to burn a memory unless he thought it was really worth it to do so.

He breathed on his hand, spoke the words, and drew the Riradesh name of the air raiders in mid air. The light coiled into itself and became a flying sphere. Marco readied himself to follow, forwards or backwards.

The flying flare shot to the left, through a smashed metal door right besides them.

“I knew it!” exclaimed Kar, triumphantly. “No need to go after it either, Marco. Calm down.”

“Uh,” the human stopped himself mid-sprint. “Why? The longer we can follow it, the better our chance to find the next turn as well, no?”

“There is not going to be another turn, actually,” Kar explained. “We’ll pass two doors, then find a set of stairs going up, then straight to the exit…”

Marco just let his silent confusion reach the spell, as he waited for an explanation of how Kar could possibly know that.

“Don’t you get it?” There was a tone of exasperation to the tentacle’s words. “The ritual and the map that Silence showed us… they are both taking us to the same place! The trick is that she was only counting the open - or, um, broken - doors. You were right on that one.”

Oh, that made sense! Actually, it was great news, it meant that they wouldn’t need to use the ritual anymore. But, well, didn’t it also mean they had just been using it unnecessarily? Except, well, they hadn’t known if they were going to the same place, and even if they did, they hadn’t known if the closed doors counted, and even if they knew, until last turn they had lost count of how many closed doors they had passed, and…

“Um, Kar, there is just one problem with that,” Marco muttered.

“Right. Since we have to assume Star knows what Silence knows, chances are we are still walking into a trap,” the spell responded.

Marco wondered if Kar was really quicker on the uptake than him, or just taking advantage of the fact that he could read his thoughts before he explained them.

The tentacle chuckled. “Well, it’s partly that, partly the photographic memory, and partly that you dumbass set the bar pretty low to begin with! Nah, in all seriousness, I hadn’t quite been thinking about that problem yet…”
“So, what do we do?” Marco asked. “Walk into a potential trap?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Kar offered. “By the way, we just passed one door, I can see the other one ahead, and the stairs, I think.”

“What’s supposed to be after that?” Marco asked.

“A straight tunnel. I remember a few side-doors in the map, but we are supposed to just ignore those,” Kar commented.

“Ok, let’s not do that,” the human suggested.

---

They had been right to take another path, Marco observed inwardly, as they took stock of the sight below them. He and Kar clung to the wooden roof of a house, remaining hidden from the bizarre crowd on the streets even as the morning sun crept fully into view.

None of the other doors in the final passageway had been open. Not that it had really been an obstacle. Marco had just used the fierceness ritual one more time, and cracked open each of the metal gates in turn. It was astounding that no one in the town above had heard the ear-crushing noise of ten inches thick metal sheets crashing against smooth stone. Then again, a few dozen feet of solid ground and the crashing of savage waves against the rocky shore would probably muffle almost any sound in existence.

Eventually, they had cracked one of the doors open and felt a breeze flowing through it. They followed that new path up all the way to the exit: the mouth of a small cavern, facing out towards the beach.

Marco had reasoned that, if they were high up enough on that subterranean maze that there was one exit to the surface nearby, then there must be other such paths close as well. Apparently, he had been right. Down in the bowels of the labyrinth, where they had found the swarm, chances would have been far slimmer, but the path had been climbing up slightly for a while, and then they had gone up the stairs.

Looking at the shape of these cliffs, at the colors of an early sunrise, with the few clouds above the green sea reflecting a sun that wasn’t itself quite visible yet, Marco had been assaulted by old memories. They were in Zonst, no doubt about it. He could recall that bay in particular, its basic natural features apparently unchanged through the millennia since he last saw them. They were very nearly at the southeasternmost point of what was already the southeasternmost province of Qur Don. It was, in fact, the area near the hometown of that boy he remembered from his dream, the one he had caught up stealing because fishing had been bad that winter. Was that just a coincidence?

Of course, they weren’t really in Zonst. There was no Zonst anymore, no Qur Don, likely not for hundreds of thousands of years. Marco wasn’t even sure if there were cold winters in this part of the world anymore. If there were, then it certainly wasn’t winter now. Even in the early morning, the heat was palpable and the humidity was all saline.

Looking at the streets below, it was also clear that this was a very different town than the one in which that boy had grown up. And that was almost certainly true even before the armies of spells had arrived.

The land around the town hadn’t been petrified, like the forest of Katato trees had been. It had
become barren too, but in a far less unnatural way. It was now a desert by the ocean. The sand from
the stone-dotted beach just simply didn’t seem to end, not even above the rocky cliffs, where no
waves could reach it. Marco and Kar hadn’t been able to find any of the freshwater streams they
thought they could remember around this place, either.

Still, there were, here and there, pockets of hardy vegetation, well adapted to the arid environment.
Marco and Kar helped themselves to the water and flesh of a sort of long leaved cactus plant. It
was a kind they had also seen the first time they had been to this dimension, albeit not even close to
this far north. It was enough to satiate both the human’s hunger and thirst, at least for the time
being. Marco had looked, mildly apprehensively, at Kar, as the monster arm also ate from the
plant. He had tried really hard not to think about what would happen inside their combined body
after that.

Then they had used the finding ritual once more, searching for the air raiders. It had pointed them,
to Marco’s annoyance more so than surprise, towards the far end of the ocean. Well, so be it. That
was not nearly the worst obstacle they had faced thus far! All they needed to do, was to find a way
to get a ship. Apparently, they had an entire port town right besides them, so that couldn’t be so
hard. Or so they had thought at the time.

Thus, making use of the last dregs of shadow remaining in the early hours of a desert sunrise,
hiding behind earthen walls and, eventually, atop wooden ceilings, they had both snuck into town.

The town in question had turned out to be a fairly different place from any he had seen in his
dreams of Zonst. It had this air of a rugged frontier port: prominent docks enclosed into an even
smaller bay, well protected by the cliffside, empty market stalls covering the plaza above the cliff,
and pragmatic unvarnished clay homes with roofs made out of driftwood dotting every other point
in the landscape. These were also obviously not the same people who had carved the smooth
tunnels below.

The villagers themselves were all strong looking men and women, despite the circumstances. Even
the children seemed harder than children had any business being. At present, however, they were
all in the streets, kneeling down in prayer.

They weren’t doing so of their own free will.

In fact, they looked tired, as if they had been forced to pray through the night, without rest or
respite. A number of spell creatures and black robed men and women patrolled the whole length
and breadth of the town, surveying the kneeling crowds. Presumably, it was them who were
enforcing the praying. They also seemed to be on the lookout for something… or someone.

Marco and Kar had so far managed to avoid the patrols. Each was made of a spell or two, flanked
by groups of frail looking monks. They saw the giant skeletal cats with the scorpion tails, and the
corrosive snail, and even a swarm of spider-eyes. The deity’s human servitors, beneath their dark
robes, didn’t look like locals either. They reminded Marco, painfully, of Abbot Thorn.

Staying on the roofs, and out of sight, Marco and Kar had quickly determined that this situation
was recent, sudden, and, in all likelihood, their fault.

This was confirmed once they arrived at their present rooftop. Below them was a plaza. In the
middle of the plaza, there was a water well and, right in front of it, there was an ancient looking
stone building, with a set of open iron gates. Facing the building, were two of Star’s iron skeletal
warunicorns, lying in wait.

‘What do you want to bet, that’s where the tunnel’s normal exit is?’ asked Kar, silently. ‘The one
the map led to. Pretty sure the welcome committee here is in our honor too, all of it.’

‘So, we come visit and, before we even get here, we already managed to fuck life over for every single person in town?’ Marco retorted, in thought. ‘Was it really like this before? The first time around?’

‘Pretty much.’

Marco tried to think if there was anything they could do for these people. Honestly, the best he could come up was the original course of action: steal a ship, then sail east. With any luck, Star’s minions - it still felt weird to think of Star as having minions - would notice the theft, realize that he was already gone from here, and leave these people alone.

‘Or, you know, kill them all in a fit of rage,’ Kar pointed out, utterly unhelpfully.

In the end, they never had the chance to find out.

Instead, Marco heard a loud neigh behind them and, right as he was turning around in panic, felt a powerful iron hoof impact his shoulder, tossing him down the building.

Kar reacted quickly, stopping their fall by interposing his springy tentacle body between Marco and the ground, keeping them unharmed, for now.

Not that it did that much good, of course. The very moment they landed, the two skeletal warncorns in front of them turned around to face him, and every spell and black-robed priest in the plaza began moving at once. They shouted something Marco couldn’t exactly understand. From the swarms of skeletal three-eyed cats that came rushing out from nearby alleys, followed by even more running monks, he thought he could make a pretty good guess.

The kneeling townsfolk gasped. They had stopped praying and turned towards the scene. Their eyes held surprise, and a sort of hopeful look. Marco could only imagine what was going through their heads right now: if the monsters got him, then they would leave, and this would all be over. It was probably along those lines.

The skeletal warncorns started advancing in his direction, slowly encircling him. Marco stood up and began rushing through the gestures and words of the fierceness ritual. Before he could complete it, an inky black tentacle came flying out of nowhere and pried his left hand away from the task of casting. A second one grabbed Kar.

Marco looked around and saw that the tentacles were connected to the amorphous oily bodies of two winged boars made of some inchoate black substance. One more type of monstrous spell he recognized from the last night at the abbey.

“Well, not to state the obvious here, Marco,” Kar quipped. “But I think we are especially fucked now.”

“Yeah, thanks, Kar, I hadn’t noticed,” replied Marco sarcastically.

He wasn’t afraid for his life, per se. The spells didn’t want him dead. But, well, sooner or later, Star would show up, and then… he really wasn’t sure what she would do to him. His best hope, perhaps, was that she didn’t know either.

There was a sudden cry, up in the air, a sort of avian screech, followed by a chorus of other, similar, calls. For a second, Marco thought it was another of Midnight’s spells. He tried to remember any spell of Star’s that was a bird.
Instead, that cry seemed to be a signal. A signal for all of hell to break loose.

Marco turned right, to see one of the three-headed scorpion tailed skeletal cats explode into a cloud of bone, yelling an anguished roar of pain as it died. A projectile of some sort, heavy and visibly metallic in the soft light of dawn, had fallen on its back.

He turned left, and saw a tangled mass of thick and hardy fishing nets descend from the sky, capturing a handful of the black-robed priests, and their spider-eye pet monsters. Then more nets fell on another group of cultists, followed by another sharp metal missile breaking the shell of the acid snail. Caustic matter splattered all over the surrounding buildings.

The cultists panicked. The kneeling townsfolk cried, stood up, and began running away, trying to give Midnight’s spells an ample berth. The creatures themselves, unlike the humans, began moving like a well trained army. The cats, jumped from place to place, avoiding further projectiles. The snail, wounded but alive, took cover under the stone gate. The three skeleton horses took off in flight, as did many of the other creatures.

Marco glanced upwards, following the warnicorns, trying to catch a glimpse of the descending assailants. He could hardly keep track of all that was happening around him, but it was clear that most of it was coming from above.

Eventually, he spotted what he originally thought was a flock of birds. As they drew closer, charging downwards, right towards his position, he realized that the creatures were much larger than birds, and each had a rider astride it. There were half a dozen rider-mount pairs. The first were un-uniformed and lightly armored, yet clearly well armed, warriors - four men and two women. The second were half-beast half-bird chimeras. More like griffons, actually, but only by a broad definition.

One of the creatures was the classical lion-eagle griffon of Greek myth, but another was half-owl and half-panther, and yet another was half-tiger and half-raven. The one in the lead was a regal looking leopard with massive falcon wings. It dove down faster than Marco could have thought possible, all while carrying a grown man on its back.

As they descended, five of the group peeled away in separate directions, throwing each a huge iron-tipped javelin at some of the spells still converging on Marco. Their leader, the curly-haired bronze-skinned lean-muscled man riding the flying leopard, kept course. He swerved only at the last second, flying parallel to the ground barely two feet up on Marco’s right. The later didn’t even have time to flinch.

The newcomer jumped from his flying mount, and, in the same movement, drew out a mighty looking sword and cut the oily tentacle holding back Kar’Margorach.

The winged leopard, now riderless, flew back up, pursued by one of Star’s skeletal horses.

“The knight captain of the air raiders, I presume,” Kar muttered to Marco. He had used English, since either way they still didn’t know the language of these people.

“I am afraid that’s not quite correct,” the stranger replied, surprisingly, in Marco’s own native tongue. “My name is Orel, and these are indeed the air raiders.”

He punctuated that last line by turning around and cutting the inchoate tendril holding Marco’s left hand. He gave a bow as he did that, throwing a knife with his free hand at one of the spider-eyeball spells which was trying to creep behind his back. It went right through the narrow snake-like pupil, stopping the creature on its tracks.
“But I am not the knight captain,” the man clarified.

Marco followed Orel’s leading glance and soon spotted a pearl-white dragoncycle, entering the battlefield from the east, followed by another five ‘griffon’ riders.

On the dragoncycle rode a young woman in her late twenties. Her hair was long and light blonde, flowing behind her in the wind. It had a sea-green streak down the left side. She had a nasty scar on the same side of her face, which thankfully missed her bright green eyes, currently engaged in an almost too intense look of concentration.

She was holding the pommel of a sword. It took Marco a second to realize that the blade was there too. He had to wait for her to angle it slightly, and for the rays of a rising sun to bounce of the otherwise nearly invisible glass of which the sword was made.

The knight captain of the air raiders was headed, determinedly, towards him. An iron skeletal warnicorn, one of Midnight’s own shadows, cut her path. The dragoncycle swung to the right, holding its left flank parallel to the ground and its rider in a horizontal position, allowing the girl to reach upwards and cut the beast’s armored ribcage open with a single swing of her blade. It was, after all, a magical weapon, forged by one of the most ancient beings in all of hell. Sam’s crystal blade.

Marco, for the first time in a long long while, felt something akin to hope. He shouted out to her, and saw her smile, briefly, before turning around to finish the warnicorn.

“Jackie!?”

Chapter End Notes

What’s this? A chapter ending on a positive note! Do those still even exist?

Why yes, yes it is, and yes they do! Have no fear everyone, because ‘Prince Jack’ is here!

This is the point in the story where our absolutely flawless shining beacon of light comes back to solve all the problems! Jackie is back everyone! Surely nothing can go wrong now! :D

Coming up next: Chapter 36: Knight Captain (assuming I don’t end up splitting that one into two)
Chapter Summary

In which we get to know Jackie all over again, a good man dies, and Marco is uneasy at dinner.

Chapter Notes

I have seen the Season 4 finale, but this chapter was 100% edited by then, and the next one 75% drafted.

In terms of things in Season 4 that might be more immediately relevant to this particular story: let me say, for the record, that I am extremely happy about the canon resolution to Jackie’s dating life!

But, of course, this story has her go in a different direction, which was planned long before Season 4 aired. The direction itself should mostly be obvious from the preceding 35 chapters ;)

(More on this, including canon S04xE15 spoilers, in the end note)

Chapter 36: Knight Captain

The knight captain of the air raiders sighed and pulled aside her spyglass. She had been following Marco’s movements through the town of Sailor's Ridge for the last half an hour or so, hoping he would eventually walk out towards the desert or, failing that, at least head for the docks. That way, they could do this the easy way: quietly and unseen, without putting any of her people at risk. Instead, he had decided to creep further and further into town, right to the gates of the goddamned Aestus Memoria.

She had been, frankly, quite surprised to see him.

Of course, there had been a time when, everywhere she went, Jackie had vainly hoped to hear news about the boy. A time when she would spend each and every journey imagining how he’d be, somehow, unexplainably, waiting for her at the destination. Every village, every nomad encampment, even the churches, each had been a new opportunity for her to be disappointed. But the time had come too, a long while ago, when she could no longer afford that disappointment.

It wasn’t that she had stopped thinking about him, of course, or wishing that he was alive, somehow, somewhere. She had just grown out of the habit of fantasizing that she would be able to find him again. Moved on from clinging to the possibility that he might be out there, waiting for her just one step ahead. She did not quite abandon hope, as much as put it aside, for the sake of more urgent matters. In time, her hope to see him again had become an old dusty thing, out of view.
in one of the many forgotten drawers of her mind, something that she barely even knew she still held.

And now, well, now he actually had shown up, out of nowhere, when she truly had least expected him to. The man below was very much changed from the boy she had known before, but he was unmistakably him. He was Marco

Jackie’s smile was bittersweet.

She hadn’t actually been looking for him this time. Or rather, she had. It’s just that she hadn’t known it would be him. *They* hadn’t known.

All that the message had said was that what seemed like half the dusk priesthood had shown up at this backwater town all of a sudden, followed by a congregation of shadows unheard of in size and raw power. That had been reason enough to take a look. Anything that Midnight was so interested in was worth investigating as far as the air raiders were concerned, but the knight captain hadn’t even dared to guess what that something could actually be.

She hadn’t expected it to be Marco. Perhaps she should have. But it had been so long…

Unfortunately, by the time they spotted him, he had already begun sneaking through enemy controlled streets. They had missed their chance to intercept him on the open desert, before he even made it into that hornet’s nest of a town. She didn’t understand how, either. It was as if he had sprouted up from the ground itself!

Not that Jackie wasn’t ready to go charging, glass blade in hand, into all of Midnight’s armies, just for a chance to talk to Marco again. The hope to see him again might have been relegated to the hidden depths of her heart, yet, now that it once again seemed within grasp, it burned just as bright as it had the day she had stepped in through the portal.

But the knight captain had her men to think about. She could ask them to put their lives in the line for the sake of the information Marco might have about Midnight… about Star. What she couldn’t do was ask them to die for the sake of her not having to wait a few hours longer to talk to her long lost boyfriend. So, she had waited, and she had looked for an opening, for the right moment to act.

Unfortunately, in the end, that choice was made for her, as one of the flying iron warnicorns up in air patrol spotted Marco too, as he lied low atop the wooden roof. The knight captain sighed. Whether trying to defend a position, or to pass undetected, it was an amateur’s mistake to disregard your exposure from above.

Fortunately for the air raiders, most of Midnight’s forces were currently also making a similar mistake.

The warnicorn threw the boy down from the roof and into the center of the plaza, leaving him surrounded and in the thick of the shadows’ horde. However costly trying to extract him from that situation was going to be, it could only get worse after that point. The conditions of the test had changed. It was no longer about picking a timing, there was only the choice to act or not to act. And *that* was hardly a choice at all.

Jackie made a few calculated motions with her wrist. The glass blade reflected the light of dawn as she did so, shining at an angle that Orel and the others would be able to see, while hopefully remaining concealed from the people below, indistinguishable from any other ray of morning sunlight.
‘Standby for orders,’ she signaled with the flashes of light. Then, once she was sure everyone was looking at her, she added, ‘standard maneuvers #4.’

She received nods from her squadron and signaled confirmation from Orel’s, further away. She waited two seconds for anyone to request a repeat. No one did.

‘Go!’ she gave the signal.

Pearl, her dragoncycle, roared beneath her. The rest of the mounts near her cawed, while Orel’s squadron, taking advantage of the misdirection, began its attack.

Standard maneuvers number four was their basic rescue hit and run. Both squadrons would do one round of bombardment, then Orel’s would take point with the extraction. If all went well, her group’s only role after that first pass would be to provide air cover and to keep the skies clear of pursuers as they made their escape.

Given who they were extracting, Jackie wished it had been the other way around, but this was the way the standard maneuver went. It had the advantage of practice. It was how they moved the fastest. In and out, done before the enemy could react, shock them and lose them.

They had never attempted standard maneuvers number four against a force quite this size. But, in principle, the larger the opposing force, the longer it would take for it to mount a response, particularly when most spells were either ground-bound or slower in flight than the air raider’s mounts were.

They should be able to do this without any casualties. They just had to be quick enough.

----

“Jackie!?” Marco shouted out to the figure far up in the sky. She smiled back at him as she turned around to finish the wounded skeletal waricorn.

Orel, by his side, grabbed the human’s non-tentacle arm, and pulled him running towards their left. Marco saw a third air raider fly towards them, a thin looking middle-aged man riding a half-tiger half-raven beast. He was flying lower and lower, dragging behind a long rope weighted by a single wooden block. He and the man on the ground seemed perfectly synchronized, as if they had done this same thing a hundred times before. Orel reached out to grab the line and…

A huge comet of green flames sprouted out from the open iron gates in the middle of the plaza. It zoomed through the air, straight for the half-tiger half-raven beast and its rider. There was an agonizing cry, and the smell of burning flesh.

Man and mount fell from the sky. Before Marco could process what had just happened, their joined corpses, entirely charred by the flames, hit the roof of a nearby home, setting it ablaze. The rescue line fell close by, slack and useless.

Marco looked back at the gate, only half-registering the horror of what had just happened. He saw Silence calmly walk out, her hand holding what he first thought was Star’s wand.

It wasn’t.

It looked like a crude stone replica of the wand.

For a moment, Marco thought that it was a fake entirely. But that was also not quite right. It held a ball of red fire spinning in the middle of it, like a miniature sun, and it was clear that the spell just
now had been channeled through it. It was certainly a magic wand, then, just not the magic wand.

The sphere of flames flashed green for an instant, and a second projectile of emerald flames, like the one which had just killed one of the air raiders, flew fast towards Marco and the man besides him. Orel, reacting quicker than the human, faster than even Kar, interposed his own body between them and the strike. He raised a hand towards the incoming meteor, as if trying, desperately, to shield himself from the spell with his open palm.

To Marco’s surprise, it worked.

A half-sphere of bright golden light manifested in front of the curly-haired man. It trembled and rippled like a soap bubble as the ball of green fire broke against it, splashing embers around like droplets. Orel’s hair flew back, pushed by a powerful, yet unnaturally localized, breeze. Despite the obvious force of the impact, not a single spark made it through the barrier. It was some sort of magic shield and, to Marco’s amazement, one strong enough to hold Star’s spell back.

Silence’s lips curved into an amused smirk, made all the more unsettling by her eyes, those permanently closed eyes that somehow still seemed to be glaring at the two of them. The girl took aim directly against the shield. The ball of flames in the middle of the wand turned a bright violet, and Star’s own voice called out a named spell.

“GLOWING DARKNESS HELLBLAST!”

A thin continuous beam of energy shot out from the wand, an unbearably bright ray of violet light. No, that wasn’t quite correct either. It wasn’t bright. It was blindingly dim. It was a darkness so absolute that it came out on the other end of light. A ray of anti-violet. Marco had seen that spell before, and he doubted whatever defense Orel had created would withstand something like that.

The spell hit the reflective surface of a thin piece of glass, and it shattered.

It was not the glass which shattered, however, but the spell. The ray of darkness cracked and broke into vanishing shard-like fragments as Jackie Lynn Thomas jumped down from mid air, and parried the strike with Sam’s magical glass blade. Like it had against the marble skin of the devil himself, Star’s spell broke apart on contact with the magical weapon.

“Oh! Hi Jackie! Long time no see!” came Star’s voice from the mute girl’s lips. It sounded unsettlingly cheerful. “Wow. So, um, now that we are all back together… are you two sure you don’t want to just talk about it? How did you put it before? ‘Take turns saying how we each feel, what we want, and what we are bothered about’? she proposed, casually.

Jackie, and Orel, both began retreating slowly away from Star, facing her the entire time. For a second, Marco considered taking Star’s offer, then he remembered that he had just seen her fry a person alive and nearly do the same to him. That didn’t make the prospect of trying group therapy seem all that promising, frankly.

“Right, didn’t think so,” Star grumbled, and Silence’s face pouted eerily. “Fine! Stay still, Jackie. You really don’t want me to miss and hit your chest…”

Marco couldn’t quite tell but, from the angle of the wand, well, was she aiming… at the sword? At her arm!?

“I call the darkness unto me, from deepest depths of earth and sea…”

Oh. Crap!
Kar and Marco thought in unison at that point. His eyes scanned the area around him, just as the
tentacle readied itself to reach out. Marco saw the corpse of a fallen spider-legged eye lying
around. It was the same spell creature that Orel had just put a knife through as he was setting him
and Kar free. The monster arm coiled around the football sized orb almost as soon as Marco was
done registering the find. They had little time for hesitation. They threw it hard against Star’s
borrowed face.

“....From ancient evils unawoken, to break the... Ugh!” The wand tilted only slightly, and a green
fireball hit the flying spider-eye spell, vaporizing it.

Well, at least they had interrupted her casting of the deadly spell.

Silence’s face reflected a sort of tired annoyance, as a shimmering pink wall rose in front of her. A
second later, a series of iron bolts crashed harmlessly against it. Three winged forms flew overhead
the four of them. It took a moment for Marco to realize that it had been the air raiders passing
overhead who had fired their crossbows at Star. Would they have hit her if he hadn’t acted first to
alert her? If he had just let her continue with the spell until the projectiles pierced her chest and
skull?

Marco didn’t even know if would have been better or worse that way.

Before he could even figure that out, Jackie ran to where he was and grabbed his hand. She turned
to quickly nod to Orel and then back to smile confidently at Marco.

“Um, dude? Brace yourself!” she warned him.

Two blurs descended from either side, one gold and one white. Before Marco could understand
what was going on, he was flying in the air, holding onto Jackie by the waist somehow, as she
steered the dragoncycle they were both riding on. Orel was no longer standing below them either. It
took a second for Marco to spot the half-leopard half-falcon beast flying up behind them, carrying
the dark-haired bronze-skinned man.

Up here, the battle was still ongoing. The spells that could fly were busy engaging the remaining
air raiders and their flying mounts, while the spells that couldn’t had long ago run for cover below.
Down in the ground, Marco could see the corpses of various spells, a few humans, and at least two
of the griffon-like mounts, including the one she had seen Silence, um, Star, hit. There were also
clumps of priests and spells held trapped inside iron nets. It wasn’t as if none of them had gotten
hurt in the chaos of battle, of course, but it was clear that the air raiders had not been aiming to kill
the monks, just contain them, when feasible.

As Jackie, Orel, and him rode up, the other raiders seemed to disengage from combat as well.

One of them, however, appeared to be trapped on the losing end of an encounter with one of the
iron flying horses. She was a stout looking woman, and was riding what looked like a winged
sabertooth. She was using a halberd to fend the spell off in close quarters, but the pointy end of the
weapon kept sliding off of the warncorn’s metal hide, barely keeping the fire-breathing
monstrosity at bay. Under different circumstances, both rider and mount might have seemed pretty
imposing, but it was clear that they weren’t faring well right now.

Marco felt Jackie tense. For a second, he thought she was about to fly back towards the battle.
Instead, she shouted something out in that local language for which he still didn’t even know the
name.

Instantly, Orel turned around and flew towards the sabertooth-rider and the monstrous spell, no
doubt following his knight captain’s command. An arrow made of fire seemed to shoot out of his outstretched hand. Marco couldn’t see any bow, so it probably was a spell, just like the golden-light shield from before.

A second later, the terrifying undead equine let out a whine of pain.

The skeletal waronicorn left its original prey behind, and soared towards Orel, who took off, on a fast dive, heading east. The leopard-falcon mount easily steered clear of the spell’s firebreath.

Meanwhile, most air raiders were flying due south, with Jackie and Marco holding the rearguard. Soon, even the woman in the sabertooth mount passed them by, saluting Jackie gratefully as she did.

Behind them, a few multi-colored moth monsters and a flying inchoate boar were still in pursuit. But they were far too slow to keep up with the flying griffons, never mind a dragoncycle. Marco knew from experience how fast those things could go, so the only reason for them being this far back was probably in order for Jackie to protect the others.

Every so often, one of the riders ahead of them would turn around and fire a crossbow bolt back towards the ever further away spells. Soon, however, their pursuers disappeared over the horizon.

For a long while after, Jackie didn’t speak. She seemed tense, alert. Marco also didn’t dare say a word, although he had a million things to say. Instead, he held tight to her, far tighter than he needed in order to hold on to their shared ride. He was so glad to have found her. So glad that she was alright.

They flew over the sea, endless blue waves far below them, and blue cloudless skies above. As they rose up and up, Marco felt the air grow colder, even under the scorching rays of the sun. Jackie remained sharp.

“I, I think we lost them,” Marco ventured eventually. “Jackie, um, I…”

“Marco. I am really glad you are alive,” she answered, stoically. “But, first of all, what the hell where you doing just now?”

“I… um… I was looking for you, Jackie,” Marco stammered. “Except, well, I didn’t know it was you. Oh, man! You have no idea how glad I am to see you! I thought you were… Well, um, Star said it has been eighty years, and well… but, I mean, you are ok! And you were so cool back there! And…”

Flying sabertooth lady circled back right that moment. She turned around once more, and briefly matched their pace, flying side by side with them. Jackie nodded and they exchanged a few unfamiliar words. Then she turned back to Marco.

“Sorry, um… dude. Casualties report,” Jackie explained, stone-faced. “Speaking of which… Marco, in sixth grade, what was the patch in my backpack?”

“Uh,” Marco blinked.

“Marco, just answer that, please!” She seemed pretty serious about it too, which was all the most bizarre given the subject matter of the question.

“It was Mighty Masker. Like, from the show. Wasn’t it?” Marco recalled. Jackie smiled at that, and seemed to relax somewhat. He still wasn’t sure what that had been about. “But, um, why?”
“Because I know you’d remember that, and it’s irrelevant enough that it’s very unlikely that Star would have known about it or seen it with the All-Seeing Eye,” Jackie explained. “So, this way, I know it’s really you, and not like, a spell-clone or an avatar of Midnight.”

An avatar of Midnight? Crap! She meant that weird possession thing, didn’t she? Like Silence?

Marco wondered if he should ask something in return, but then realized that the original question worked as a test for both of them. Star wouldn’t have guessed that Jackie had any kind of patch on her bag in sixth grade at all. “Wait! You just said... Casualties report? That man, the tiger-rider…”

“Ythul,” Jackie said, solemnly. “He had been one of us for three years already, after a shadow took his son for the priesthood, and part of Orel’s wing for the better part of the last two. He was a good man and a model soldier.”

“I… I am sorry,” Marco said. He wasn’t sure if it was his condolences, or an apology.

“Yeah,” Jackie replied simply. “No one else, fortunately. Orel is also considered missing until he rejoins us at base, but I am sure he is fine. He’s dealt with way worse. Unfortunately, we also lost a second mount. That might be the harder news for those back in base, actually. We recovered the rider, which is good, but, at the same time, we always have more soldiers than griffons.”

He wasn’t sure how to take in all that. It seemed kind of callous of her to talk about the flying creatures and how people would take the news back home, particularly right after confirming that a man was dead. Then again, Marco remembered that dream, the one about the bridge, and the soldiers, and his own hard decisions as Guildmaster of Zonst, and bit his tongue from saying something stupid. Besides, he kind of was the cause for their loss, both of Ythul’s life and of the two griffons.

Jackie shook her head.

“So, you were saying you were looking for me or not?” she asked, switching the topic back to what they were talking about before the report.

“I mean, I knew I was looking for the knight captain of the air raiders,” Marco explained. “I just didn’t know it was you!”

“Really?” Jackie seemed surprised. “I thought my description was public knowledge. All these years and you didn’t know? Marco, I gave you as many signs as I could! And I looked everywhere for signs of you!”

Years? Oh, right! She didn’t know!

“Jackie,” Marco said, softly, “time in Hekapoo’s dimension moves differently than on the outside. A year here is…”

“... about half a minute on Earth. I know,” Jackie shook her head. “Marco, you explained this to me back before we left for Sam’s castle. Plus, I would have figured it out, just from the fact that Star already was… well, you know… Uh, you do know, right?”

“Midnight?” Marco asked. “Not that I am entirely sure what that means, but…”

“Yeah, ok. You do know,” she interrupted him. “The point is: you still don’t look fifteen, dude.”

“That’s from the first time around,” Marco explained. “I’ve only been back for, um... not even sure now, but less than half a month, for sure.”
Jackie blinked. “That’s like fifteen days or so, right? I am not sure I remember months.” Marco nodded. “Um, wow…”

“Yeah. So, well, how long have you been here?” he asked, awkwardly.

“Thirteen years,” Jackie stated, plainly. She seemed to go quiet at that. Not angry, not sad, just unemotional, replying to the question matter-of-factly.

“Oh, Jackie… I am so sorry…” Marco began. She didn’t say anything in response. He wasn’t sure how to continue.

Marco knew just how hard surviving in Hekapoo’s dimension for so long was, and that was before they had to deal with an insane Star and whatever else had happened to the rest of the world. His mind flashed to an image of Jackie, fourteen-year old Jackie, emerging alone out of the portal into that hellish landscape of petrified trees…

His hand, the human one, slid up to care Jackie’s hair without thinking. He stopped himself as he once again noticed the wide scar on the left of her face.

“What happened?” he asked, cautiously.

Jackie paused for a moment, seeming hesitant. Marco could swear he felt her body tense as she rode in front of him. Then, suddenly, she chuckled and turned around to flash Marco a nonchalant smile.

“That one was actually from before,” she explained grinning. “Back on the stairs out of hell? Wish? Ghost-Lizard-Dude? He sucker punched me, remember? When I woke up, you guys were missing and my face was burning. It got better, but it kinda left this as a reminder, and a lesson. Hopefully it doesn’t look too bad on me, though. Honestly, I think it might even be kinda badass,” she half-joked.

“It is pretty damn badass, actually,” Marco nodded. It was all too true, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t worried about it. “Still, I am sorry. About what happened back then and… god I can’t even imagine how you managed to… I mean…”

“Survive in this place?” Jackie suggested. “Amass a flying militia dedicated to being a pain in Midnight’s butt?” she added.

“Well, yeah…” Marco trailed off, taken aback by Jackie’s casual tone.

“Dude, I had this.” The girl pulled the glass sword briefly out of its nacre scabbard and showed it to Marco as they flew. “Remember? ‘Nothing shall break it as long as you have the will to continue to wield it’? And that was an understatement! This thing is the freaking Elder Wand!”

“The… what?” Marco asked.

“You know? From Harry Potter?” she asked, leaving him just as confused. “Never mind, then. The point is, it’s almost like, as long as I have it in my hand, and I don’t lose my nerve, I literally can’t lose a fight. I am still not so sure about facing Midnight’s avatar head-on with it, though, but it’s still one hell of a cheat code!” She grinned at him, cool as the ocean breeze around them.

“Um, so, that’s all the more reason why I really really don’t mean to startle you,” spoke a voice from around Jackie’s waist. “But I don’t believe we have yet been introduced and we probably should be before we get to wherever we are going.”
If Marco had been in Jackie’s place, he would have almost certainly jumped up and fallen from the
dragoncycle at that point. Instead, the girl lowered her blade, and placed it a thumb’s width away
from the point of Marco’s arm where the demon tentacle started. He almost flinched at that.

“I am not startled,” she clarified calmly. “Who and what are you?”

“Ah, ahem, Kar’Margorach, reformed demon arm at your service,” Kar retorted nervously.
“Did I mention reformed? Ask the boy.”

“Actually, I think we have met,” Jackie pointed out. “Back in Echo Creek, no? You are that same
tentacle arm from when Star tried to ‘fix’ Marco’s hand for a karate match, right? I didn’t know
you could talk.”

“Lucky you,” Marco observed. “It’s actually rarer for him to shut up. Also, um, karate match?”

“I would shut up, but then all that one would hear in here is your constant whining!” Kar
retorted.

“‘In here’? As in, inside Marco’s head?” Jackie asked. “You can read Marco’s thoughts?”

“What few thoughts there are, yes,” Kar retorted. “Believe me, you are not missing out. It’s all
woe-is-me and cliche sexual fantasies!”

“Says you, asshole,” Marco spat back. “It’s not like your never ending commentary is half as
insightful as you think it is, either!”

Jackie paused for a second. “Ok, I was going to ask how do I know you are not mind controlling
Marco, or something. But now I think I can take the risk on that,” she said, rolling her eyes a bit.

“Still, Marco, isn’t it one of Star’s spells? Should we be worried about him?”

“‘Oh, not you too!’” Kar bemoaned.

“Look who is whining now,” Marco observed. “But, to answer your question, Kar seems to be
pretty independent from Star, really.”

“Never been much of a momma boy,” Kar explained. “Not back then, and not now either.”

“Look, he is an ass, but he is also probably the best friend I had the first time I was in this
dimension,” Marco continued. “It didn’t start that way. Back when you first met him, in Echo
Creek, he really mostly wanted to devour everyone’s bowels...”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it, kid!”

Marco sighed. “The point is, he manifested again at some point when I was adventuring in this
dimension, the first time around. At first he helped me out because, well, we are kind of in the
same boat together, so to speak.” The same body, actually, and Marco neglected to mention the
whole bit about them both being mind controlled for a while. The story was complicated enough
without that. “Over the years, though, Kar began to see the consequences of evil actions on others,
and the way that good deeds positively affected people around us...”

“Yeah, yeah, power of love and friendship, doing good is its own reward, etc, etc. Can we
leave it at reformed... please?”

“Kar, you literally went through a phase were you wouldn’t even lie, because, and I quote: ‘that’s
“And, obviously, I got past that inanity once I realized one can both have a moral compass and not be a whiny little bitch like you at the same time!” Kar huffed.

“The point is,” Marco chuckled. “He is part of the reason I stayed alive then, and, um… also sort of the reason I kept going now,” he admitted.

Fortunately, Kar didn’t seem to have any further witty put down with which to punctuate that final admission.

“Ok.” Jackie sheathed her sword in one quick movement. “That all sounds good enough for me. Nice to meet you then, um, Karmargorav?”

“’Kar’ is fine,” Kar offered politely.

“Ok, Kar,” she said, extending a hand towards him. “Jackie.”

They rode for what seemed like hours after that. Jackie asked about what happened after she became unconscious, on the other side of the portal, and Marco described to her the fight between Star and Janna, as well as Tom’s arm.

He told her about his arrival through the portal, about the petrified forest. She nodded, knowingly. Then he described his encounter with the iron waricorn.

“Ouch, yeah, dude, the first time I saw one of those things I was so terrified that I didn’t even notice what it was.”

“Yeah, same.”

Marco described the abbey, Abbot Thorn, and Silence as well. He talked about the fierceness ritual, and the truth ritual, and Star’s possession.

Jackie flinched at that last bit, then she nodded, sagely.

“We’ve seen it before, a few times. Poor girl. For what is worth, I don’t think she is dead, but being a prisoner on your own body is not really any better,” the knight captain added, sadly. “Best we can tell, Midnight can do that to anyone who has received one of her ‘miracles’, and there is no way to stop it other than, well… the obvious.”

There was something to the grim determined tone of Jackie’s words that made quite clear what she meant.

“And people know this?” Marco asked.

“Some do, some don’t.” Jackie shrugged. “They know that praying to her is bad. But people are desperate. This world is pretty fucked up, and it’s not like either opposing her or ignoring her keeps you safe from the shadows and the side effects of other people’s prayers.”

“So, you guys fight against her?” Kar interjected. “How?”

“Not very effectively,” Jackie admitted. “We mostly do skirmishes. Destroy some of her spells, rescue people from towns that are about to fall prey to some ill conceived prayer, collect as many books describing the origins of Midnight as we can, most of them stolen from the priesthood...”

Marco recalled Abbot Thorn’s library. “It’s not much, but it’s what we can do.”
“And she hasn’t been able to stop you?” Marco asked.

Jackie smiled. “Well, first she’d have to find us. It seems there are still plenty of places in this world in which she cannot track us. You’d have to ask Orel for the specifics, magic is not my forte.”

“So, is he some kind of magic user?” Marco confirmed the implication. It certainly had seemed so, back during the previous battle.

“Yeah.” Jackie herself seemed uncertain. “I think what he’d say is that he is been ‘blessed with power to heal and protect’. He is not like Star, though, not even like what she was before. And I am pretty sure it’s not like your magic either.”

“You mean the rituals?” he asked. Jackie nodded.

Marco supposed those were magical. Still, it felt more like haggling with, um, something else to do magic for him. He hardly thought of himself as a magic user.

Either way, whatever that shield spell back there had been, it definitely hadn’t seemed like a ritual…

“I think, if I had to guess, that he is more like what Janna was,” Jackie suggested, hesitantly. “Like a white magic version of the stuff she was learning to do before we got to Sam’s castle.”

“Have you…” Marco asked. “Do you know if Janna is still alive?”

Jackie sighed.

“No idea. Every time there is a rumor about a witch or a mage we investigate, sometimes it turns out to be real. Mostly it’s just that: a rumor. Not once has it been Janna. Plus, from what you are saying, if she came through at the same time as Star did, and they were already fighting…” She paused for a second. “Look, Marco, Janna is pretty resourceful, but I don’t see how she could make it.”

He also didn’t think so. It was not like him and Jackie, after all, Marco was pretty sure that Star had actually meant to hurt Janna, even back before she became an evil goddess. Plus, otherwise, she’d have had thirteen years to find Jackie and the air raiders. It had taken him a few weeks, and the witch girl could fly. So, the fact that there hadn’t been any signs of her for so long, well...

Not that Marco himself had exactly forgiven Janna for almost killing him. Still, well, he wondered how Tom was going to take those news.

Instead of saying anything, Marco looked ahead. There was land in the horizon now, some sort of mountain range rising like a shadowy wall against the omnipresent blue background. Had they nearly crossed the ocean already?

“But, Marco,” Jackie added. “How did you get away from Star? You were just saying that you were before one of her altars, she had turned this girl, um, Silence, into an avatar and you…?”

“We ran, Jackie,” he explained. “There was this tunnel, and well, it led to this whole underground maze. I still don’t know why she didn’t chase us, but I guess she thought it didn’t matter, since she could catch us at the other end.”

Jackie muttered a word that he didn’t quite understand. It sounded like some form of bastardized Riradesh for ‘Tide Reminder’.
Marco looked at her, puzzled.

“It’s the name of that huge gateway in the middle of the town you were just in. The one she came out of,” Jackie explained. “It’s rumored to be one of the gates to the underworld. But you didn’t come out from there. Did you?”

“We were supposed to, but found our own exit from the underworld instead,” Kar grinned triumphantly.

Marco explained how they found the secondary exit, and how they then decided to go into town nonetheless to try and grab a ship.

“Um, in any case, I guess that explains why we never saw you cross the desert…” Jackie mused.

Before she could say anything else, another two griffon mounts closed back to where she and Marco were flying. They exchanged words with Jackie, once again in that unknown language.

This time their exchange went on for quite a bit longer than the one right after the battle. There were a few cautious glances towards Marco, and plenty uneasy looks at Kar, but Jackie just smiled and appeared to explain the situation. Eventually, the two soldiers nodded and saluted before flying back to the front of the formation.

“Sorry about that, Marco. But we are almost there,” she apologized. “I am assuming you two don’t know of any way to stop Midnight. Do you?”

She answered Marco’s worried look with a weak but disarming smile. “Nah, didn’t think so, either.”

Marco had been hoping Jackie had some idea on that, actually. But it appeared that, in that at least, she wasn’t really any further ahead than Kar or him. No one among the three of them had any idea of how to get through to Star, or even how to prevent her from doing the things she was doing now.

“Well, Marco, I am really really glad you are alive, personally,” Jackie noted, smiling at him. “But as far as the rest of the air raiders are concerned, this mission might be a bit of a tough sell as a success right now.”

---

Across the ocean from the continent that had formerly hosted Qur Don, laid yet another desert, one nestled between two ancient mountain chains. Unlike Zonst, this area had already been a desert back when Marco had first been here. It’s just that it was, if such a thing was possible, even more of a desert now.

The arid sand under their flying path had seemed no more habitable to him that some of the hell dimensions they had crossed before arriving at Hekapoo’s. Here and there he could spot bright oasis-like reflections below. It had taken Marco only an instant to realize that those weren’t pools of water, or even simple mirages, but rather lake-sized patches where the sand had literally turned to glass, perhaps from the heat alone. Up there, flying high above the dunes, the temperature had still been scorching, but survivable.

Slightly lower than the mountains was a tall mesa, marking the transition between the easternmost ridge and the sandy plains of death at the bottom of the desert. Above the mesa, some insanely hardy vegetation survived, in the form of small unearthy cacti and alien-looking dry bushes. A long, narrow, and unbelievably deep canyon crossed the face of the flat highland, like a sharp cut onto the stony flesh of the planet.
The air raiders had gone into the canyon, with Marco as Jackie’s passenger, diving below the surface of the mesa, far enough from the entrance that the sky became but a thin blue line above them. They flew along a vertical plane the size of a small country, yet only a handful meters thick.

Within that narrow separation there was more life than in the entire world above: a small forest of water-efficient rock-climbing vegetation, feeding off from who knows which sort of underground sources. The walls of the canyon provided it with just enough shade to keep the internal temperatures bearable.

Eventually, halfway through to the bottom, they had all gone into a small crack on the wall of the canyon. Within it was a tunnel and, on the other end of that tunnel, a cavern large enough to hold a small town.

And that was indeed what it held!

The permanent base of the air raiders, deep within the mountain wall, was smaller than the coastal town Marco had left behind earlier in the day, but far larger than abbott Thorn’s abbey. The first structure he spotted, by the entrance, was the stone-fenced stables for the griffon mounts, followed by a set of subterranean water wells nearby.

Further ahead, the walls of the cavern where all covered in home-sized holes, chiseled out of the stone itself, with stone stairs going up and down between five separate levels. Most of the sub-caverns had wooden doors attached, presumably for privacy, but Marco could also see a few doorless storage rooms, full of wood, cacti, and dried meats. There was also a larger sub-cavern which seemed to be some sort of underground mushroom farm, and another that was lit by a huge furnace, on the opposite end of the main cavern.

As soon as they landed, Marco noticed the few extra griffon mounts by the cave’s mouth. If each squadron was normally six riders in size, and none were currently out on patrol or the like, then the two that had flown with Jackie represented about half of the air raider’s forces. There were homes for a lot more than twenty-four people here, though. Marco counted more than sixty doors before giving up, and that made the unlikely assumption that everyone roomed alone. Jackie hadn’t been kidding about them having far more soldiers than griffons!

Marco also noticed, right by the other mounts, the half-leopard half-falcon of the man who had saved him. Clearly, Orel had managed to not only shake the undead horse’s pursuit, but actually outrace the rest of the raiders back home. Then again, his mount seemed to be particularly fast, while they had been flying at the speed of the slowest member of their contingent.

As Marco and Jackie landed, the amber skinned warrior came out running to receive them.

The knight captain of the air raiders dismounted first, helping Marco and Kar off their ride as well, before turning back beaming to her second in command. Orel grinned in return, and shouted something in the local tongue. Jackie replied in kind, and gave out a chuckle.

He raced towards her and lifted her up by the waist. She hugged him around the shoulders and tilted her head down.

Marco stared out surprised, as Jackie planted her lips against Orel’s.

They kissed. It was a kiss bright as the blue skies and burning like the desert winds, a kiss born from the glee of finding each other alive for yet another day, a kiss that seemed both full of desire, and yet deeply familiar. It was a kiss which Marco was instantly certain Jackie and Orel had shared many times before.
The first thought that crossed his mind was a primal feeling of betrayal. It was followed, an instant later, by the painful realization that he and Jackie hadn’t kissed after the fight, that they hadn’t kissed in the entire time they were flying back. She hadn’t said anything. They hadn’t talked about their own relationship, and all she had said about Orel was as a soldier and mage. She had given no hints of this! They had flown for hours, and not for an instant had Marco considered asking Jackie if they were still together, if she was now seeing someone else. Nor, apparently, had she considered mentioning that she was.

Then again, what right had he to expect any different? What right, when, from her perspective, he had been out of Jackie’s life for thirteen years? Of course she had moved on!

“Uh? Wha...” he mumbled, dumbly, before his brain caught up to his mouth.

No. Jackie owed him no explanation. It was unfair to even expect her to still have feelings for him, after so long.

It was not her fault that it had been so much shorter a span of time on his end.

He really ought to not make a big deal about it. After all, the important thing was that Jackie was alive! Last night, Marco had been sure she had died. Compared to that, what did it matter if their relationship was ancient history? All that mattered was that she was alright.

“Oh, right, I...” Jackie turned back, embarrassed. “I am sorry. Marco, I believe you’ve already met Orel. He is the chief lieutenant of the air raiders, and, um, my boyfriend.”

Thirteen years.

“A pleasure to finally be formally introduced,” said Orel, switching back to English, giving Marco a warm personable smile and extending out a hand.

Don’t make a big deal of it.

“Right,” Jackie continued, a bit more nervously than Marco had come to expect of the unflappable knight captain. “So, this is Marco, my, well...”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Marco said as graciously as he could, “and friend.”

They had a world to fix, and friends to rescue. There was no time for silly teenage drama. He shook Orel’s arm with his left hand, the human one.

“A friend of the knight captain is a friend of all who oppose the falling night,” Orel replied, solemnly.

Jackie appeared to frown at that exchange, for some reason. Maybe some of Marco’s hesitation had shown through, despite his best efforts? Maybe she, like Marco, was slightly put off by her boyfriend’s overly grandiose declaration?

“Oh, well, right,” she pressed on. “Also, this is... Kar’Margorach, was it?”

“Nice to meet you,” Kar spoke. His toothy mouth opened upside down, as Marco’s tentacle arm remained pointing downwards, making itself as non-threatening as such a being could ever be.

Orel’s expression turned serious all of a sudden. He seemed to regard the tentacle arm for a few moments, lost deep in thought. Instead of extending his hand again, he turned towards Marco, ignoring Kar’s greeting.
“I believe I can get rid of that thing,” he announced calmly. “Unfortunately, I might not be able to guarantee that the process will be painless. Would you like a moment to brace yourself?”

“Excuse you!!?” Kar exclaimed.

“Get rid of it?” Marco asked, shocked. His previous thoughts about Jackie and their former relationship entirely derailed by the mage’s off-hand proposition.

“Well, surely you do not travel with a demon parasite on purpose?” Orel asked, surprised. “That is a fell creature, Marco, made of worse stuff than nearly all of Midnight’s shadows! I could cure you of such curse…”

Kar grunted at that, and darted back up, making itself taller than the air raider lieutenant, looming threateningly over his head. "First, I prefer symbiote. Second, I’d like to see you try!"

“Would you, demon? Very well, then.” A shimmering white glow formed around Orel’s raised hands, and Marco realized that, whatever Kar was about to respond, he himself would rather not see the mage try anything of the sort.

“Look, asshole, I was just trying to say hi, but if you are going to have your head up your ass,” Kar’s body tensed like a snake about to strike, “then let’s make it literal!”

“Marco, I assure you, this is for the best… please lower your other arm,” Orel added in a reassuring tone, pointedly ignoring the demon arm’s threat.

“Stop! Both of you!” came a calm but firm order. Jackie was giving all of them a glare that could have caused a statue to flinch. Her previously nervous demeanor had been replaced by the characteristic cold pissed-off-ness of every ranking officer breaking up infighting among the troops. “Orel, stand down, now! That’s an order. Kar’Margorach, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stand down as well.”

To Marco’s surprise, they both did.

Jackie looked around, at the crowd that was slowly gathering around the four of them. There were some griffon riders taking a suspiciously long time to unload their mounts, as well as many other random onlookers. The knight captain shouted something at them that Marco didn’t understand. They nodded, pointedly looked away, and began speeding along.

“Orel, Kar is friendly,” Jackie explained, sounding just a smidge softer. “He’s helped Marco before. He opposes Midnight. I should have explained that first.”

The man seemed to consider this for a moment, then shook his head. He glanced back at the tentacle arm and the human to whom it was attached.

“My knight captain, Marco, I am truly sorry,” he lowered both arms to his sides and bowed down his head. “I apologize both for assuming you’d welcome being relieved from that creature’s presence, and for the rashness of my actions.”

“Um,” Marco muttered, taken aback by the sudden change in attitude of the other man. “Uh, apology accepted?”

He wondered if he should be apologizing as well. Or was that up to Kar? He certainly didn’t expect the monster arm to apologize any time soon. Then again, hadn’t Orel just worded his apology to explicitly exclude Kar too?
“Thank you, Marco, your forgiveness does you credit,” Orel added, lifting his head back and showing an embarrassed smile. It was quickly replaced, however, by a more stern expression. “That said, I stand by my offer. I shall not cure you against your will. But I do implore you to consider it. That creature is either a demon proper, or a curse mimicking a demon’s form. He cannot ever be trusted. The risk of him being the former is too high to ignore.”

“Well, aren’t you a ray of sunshine yourself?” asked Kar irritated.

“Indeed,” replied Orel, absently, before turning back to Jackie. “I apologize once again, and mean no disrespect, but my advice must remain the same. On this and, um… similar matters.”

He seemed to be glancing down, at the nacre scabbard holding the glass sword.

“I know, Orel, I know.” Jackie sighed. “Look, you can think of it as exactly like that, if it helps. We can use any help we can get, no matter the source. Deal with the greater evil first and all that.”

Marco was sure he was missing some subtext to that conversation, and that was before Jackie added something else, in that other language that he didn’t understand. Orel nodded, but seemed still mildly put off.

“For my part, Kar, I trust Marco’s judgement,” she added, turning towards the monster arm. “Besides, I think everyone deserves to be judged by their own actions.”

“Um, past or present actions?” Kar asked. “Because that kind of would make a difference here.”

Orel threw the monster arm a really nasty glare.

Kar’s smile widened. God, the asshole was provoking the mage on purpose!

“Let’s say present,” Jackie mused, taking it in stride. “But I reserve the right to change those terms based on what I hear about the past.”

“Exceedingly merciful, my Knight Captain,” Orel interjected. His smile belied some playfulness beneath the formal address. “But I must note that some of the other soldiers might have their own misgivings. Do you, um… want me to put them at ease?”

It was pretty clear from the hesitant tone that he wasn’t entirely onboard with that idea. He clearly didn’t trust Kar. He didn’t want people ‘at ease’ around the monster arm. But it was obvious he thought it would make Jackie’s life easier if he said something. Marco might not entirely like the guy, particularly after the way he had threatened Kar, but, he had to admit, he did seem to care about Jackie. Marco probably ought to feel that was a good thing. Didn’t he?

Besides, he could understand people being afraid of Kar. It was nothing knew or unexpected. It had been a constant the first time he was in this dimension, at least after Mirria. The only saving grace, back then, was that the tentacle arm could just vanish, reabsorb into his skin at will.

But they hadn’t been able to do that since Kar had come back out, in the abbey. It was like something was preventing him from reabsorbing, this time around. There didn’t seem to be any good explanation for it either, and yet…

Marco looked up, and realized that both Jackie and Orel were staring at him.

He looked down, to were their own glances led, and realized that he was looking right at his right arm.
His very much human right arm.

“Whoa,” he lifted it up in surprise.

“Orel, did you…?” Jackie asked, shocked.

“Of course not! I gave my word!” the man replied. He turned to Marco. “Is it… is it really gone?”

‘Tell them yes, tell them yes,’ prodded a voice in his head. ‘Better yet, tell them I move around. That I am now your dick. Who knows? Depends what she is into. It might win her back from Saint Shithead over there!’

“No,” Marco spoke aloud. “He’s in here alright.”

----

After the introductions, and a bit of an explanation on symbiotic monster arm reabsorption, Jackie and Orel decided to give Marco a tour of the air raiders base. Apparently, there would be a dinner later, where he would be able to meet the rest of the group. But, before that, the other two had to attend a debrief of sorts. Marco, more due to the language barrier than any lack of trust - or so Jackie had claimed - would skip that meeting for now.

As Jackie explained the purpose of the different rooms and supplies, Marco mostly walked in silence, lost in his own thoughts. Well, his and Kar’s. They each had competing theories about why now, of all times, the tentacle had finally been able to fade back into his arm again, when he couldn’t do so for days before.

Kar insisted that Marco had been too afraid to let go of him before, but now that he had ‘his big damn ex-girlfriend and her whole goddamn army’ around (his words, not Marco’s), he finally had stopped ‘clinging onto him like a scared little baby’ (same). The human retorted that it was Kar who was afraid now, afraid of Orel and of being jeered at by an entire cave full of people. So, as far as Marco was concerned, it was Kar who had finally figured out how to hide himself, when he really needed to!

“And, finally, this up here is the forge,” Jackie explained. “It’s nothing too fancy, but there is enough ore in these mountains that we will never run out of weapons.”

She wasn’t kidding, either. The walls of the forge were lined up with baskets holding iron bolts and shelves full of spears. From the ceiling hung iron nets. Plus, there were these large ovoid shapes, looking a bit like bombs but cast entirely of metal. They had a long stick coming out of one end too, ending in steel ‘feathers’. It was as if someone had put an arrow through a football, and then covered the entire thing in some molten steel alloy.

“What are those?” Marco asked, surprised.

Jackie smiled. “Those are flechettes.”

“An Earth weapon, apparently,” Orel added.

Marco looked at Jackie, confused. He had never heard of those before. The name sounded familiar, but not the objects.

“They are a type of early bombardment munition,” Jackie explained. “Chiefly used around World War I, but since replaced by explosives. We haven’t found a way to even make gunpowder yet, so that’s the best we got. They are still remarkably effective if you have planes to drop them from, or
Right. Those were the things that had broken the spine of that three-eyed cat spell, and blown apart the carapace of the huge acid snail. Weren’t they? Marco certainly couldn’t argue with ‘effective’.

“Um, I guess you weren’t kidding when you said you were a history buff,” he commented.

Jackie grinned at that. “Honestly, dude, now I wish I had studied more military tactics back then, plus some chemistry. But hindsight is twenty-twenty, I guess.”

“So, um, no swords?” he questioned, looking around.

“For air combat?” Jackie asked. “Don’t be ridiculous! Do you have any idea how hard it is to get any reach with this thing?” She patted her scabbard. “It’s only worth it for Orel and I because these are magic swords, for anyone else there is no point. We do forge a few throwing knives, though.”

A teenage boy came up running to them then. Jackie stopped short her discussion on the merits of various medieval weaponry for air superiority and exchanged a few opaque words with the lad.

That boy was probably the youngest he’d met so far, too, yet barely a year or so younger than they themselves had been on the other side of the portal. Everyone else was an adult. Most of them were in their late teens or twenties, a sizable minority were middle-aged, and very few elderly. Not too surprising for a combat force, of course, but Marco wondered what happened to the families of the people who lived here, if indeed they had families...

“Marco, we need to go,” Jackie explained. “We’ll take you to your room. There is a solo cavern that recently became vacant. I think that’d be best for you and Kar. Orel will come pick you up for dinner. We can talk some more then.”

-----

Dinner, apparently, began with Jackie giving a speech. It was a speech that started in solemn and somber tones, with people nodding gravely. It followed through with an inspiring rallying cry, as Jackie held her crystal blade aloof, jumping atop a table and flashing the crowd a defiant smile. People clapped. She said a few more words, and people cheered and laughed.

Marco only wished he understood what she was saying!

That was doubly true when they turned back towards him, nodding approvingly, and he was only able to smile back weakly at them, wave, and hope that was the right reaction. What was she telling them about him? Could he even deliver on whatever the hell Jackie had just promised? She obviously had to sell them on the notion that rescuing him had been worth two griffons and one dead man. But Marco himself wasn’t sure that was true. He particularly had been trying very hard not too realize that his room, the one that had recently ‘become vacant’, was almost certainly Ythul’s room.

Be as it might, Marco had to admit that Jackie was clearly, if not a born leader, then definitely a made one. The mood of these people had started bleak, for both those that had come back with the raiding party, as well as those who had received them. By the end of the knight captain’s speech, however, their spirits seemed to have been lifted. Sure, the fermented cactus drink that accompanied their meal had probably helped somewhat as well, but Marco still felt that the livelier mood now was mostly Jackie’s doing!

Marco’s own spirits, unfortunately, had gone the opposite way from the rest of the crowd.
It wasn’t like things weren’t, objectively, a thousand times better than they had been last night, of course. Jackie was alive! And he was surrounded by people who were not trying to capture or murder him! Calling it a step up would be an understatement.

At the same time, Marco couldn’t really speak with most of these people, and Jackie was busy chatting with others in the middle of the crowd, in that same language he couldn’t follow. Orel, the only other person there that spoke English was, of course, right by Jackie, wrapping an arm around her shoulders, laughing with her and gesticulating at their captivated public…

‘You know, kid. I think you are angrier at that pretty boy than I am,’ Kar noted inside his head. ‘And, I shall remind you, he was just trying to kill me.’

Pretty boy? Yeah, Marco thought, Orel was, infuriatingly pretty. There was a delicate beauty to his face and bright hazel eyes that contrasted with his rugged warrior body and demeanor. His features were handsome in what on Earth would have come off as a middle-eastern sort of way. He wasn’t quite as muscular as Marco was, in his adult body, but he seemed lean and powerful nonetheless. Was that what Jackie saw in him?

‘Uh, boy, you got it bad,’ Kar remarked.

‘Got what bad?’ Marco retorted, rolling his eyes.

He realized some of the air raiders around him were staring in his direction. One seemed to ask a question. Marco smiled at them and pointed at his mouth, then his ear.

“Can’t understand,” he explained in Riradesh. The young woman seemed puzzled at first, but then nodded and went back to talking to her fellow soldiers.

‘Got what bad?’ Marco asked again, silently. He bit into a bunch of fungus-covered cactus leaves. They were surprisingly good.

‘Please, you know what,’ Kar replied. ‘Jealousy. You thought finding Jackie and Star would mean getting your girlfriends back, and now you are two for two out of luck.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Kar, we have more important things to worry about than that!’ he retorted.

‘True, and yet…’ Kar observed, saying his piece without even needing to complete the thought. Marco felt the tentacle arm’s smugness inside his mind.

‘Look, I miss the way things were, in more ways than one,’ Marco explained, as he took a sip of the harsh burning drink in his cup. ‘But I also know it’s been a long time. If Jackie’s moved on, then that’s ok. We need to figure out what happened to Star, and how to get her to see reason. And we need to find Tom, and Janna, and Hekapoo. And get back home. We don’t have time for me to drop shitty teenage drama from thirteen years ago on her!’

“Um, sorry Marco, are you busy?” came Jackie’s voice from somewhere in front of him. Like, right in front of him.

“Uh?” Marco asked, caught off balance. His entire train of thought in disarray as he looked up at the girl crouching in front of him. Oh, come on! Was he really back to not being able to speak to Jackie? What was this? Last year in Echo Creek? He shook his head. “I mean, sorry, no, of course I am not.”

“Well, you were making a face,” Jackie pointed out, smiling calmly. “I thought maybe you were having a conversation with, you know, Kar.”
Guilty as charged. “Yeah, sorry. Nothing important, though.”

‘Liar.’

“Ok, Marco.” Jackie hesitated. “Would you mind going on a short walk with me?”

“Um, yeah sure,” Marco replied. “I mean, no, of course I wouldn’t mind.”

----

“Look, I just wanted to talk to you in private for a bit,” she explained, as they made their way away from the dining crowds and towards the cavern’s rim.

In private from Orel, Marco assumed, since no one else could understand them anyways.

“About Star?” Marco asked. That was certainly the more urgent topic, and Jackie had sort of hinted that they would discuss it after dinner, but it also didn’t seem that private, really. “Or about Kar?”

The monster arm was certainly somewhat of a delicate topic around Orel, so maybe that was what Jackie wanted to talk about in private.

“About us, actually,” she explained.

“Us?” Marco asked. “You and me?”

“Yeah, that’s what ‘us’ usually means, Marco.” Jackie chuckled. “Look, I was thinking about it during dinner, and I just realized that it really has been only a few months since we last met for you. Hasn’t it?”

Marco nodded.

“Well, it has been longer for me,” Jackie explained. “So, a lot of things have changed. I am not sure I’ll be the same person you remember. In fact, strike that, I know I won’t be. Even talking to you like this feels weird. I haven’t spoken English in over twelve years. It just feels so weird now… um, dude?”

They both laughed nervously at how forced that last part had sounded.

“And, obviously, that’s just the tip of the iceberg,” she added. “I have Orel around and I have the air raiders, and my life is so different from what it was before, so...”

Marco sighed. “No, no, Jackie. I understand completely. You have a different life now, and a different boyfriend, and too many things have changed. It’s been a lot shorter time for me, but believe me, it feels like years. So, I’d be happy just being friends. We have a lot to do and...”

“So, what you are saying is,” Jackie bit her lip, nervously. “That you are no longer interested in going out with me?”

“What!” Marco blinked, confused. “Jackie, of course I am! But, well, I thought you weren’t anymore, after so long! And, well, what about Orel? I thought he was your boyfriend?”

Jackie raised an eyebrow at him.

“Oh…” Marco mused. “Oh!”

“Marco, I know you and him got off on the wrong foot. Particularly with the whole thing with Kar.
But Orel is a really good man. I think you two can grow to be good friends, and I do love him, too. We’ve been together for five years now,” she explained. “And I know I promised to ask you first, before dating anyone else myself. But, to be fair, you weren’t around. I didn’t even know if you would ever be around. Not to say I stopped loving you, or that I stopped hoping, but…”

Marco leaped towards Jackie, and, by way of a response, planted a deep kiss on her lips. She kissed him back. For an instant, it was like the entire world around them had left Hekapoo’s dimension. As if it had become stuck inside a dimension where the flow of time was even further dilated. Everything around them stood frozen, as they enjoyed an eternity of reassuring love in but an instant.

Eventually, time resumed, however, and with it, a measure of doubt.

“Um, I did get it right this time, right Jackie?” Marco asked nervously. “You are saying that you want to date the two of us, like I was dating both you and Star back on Earth. Correct? Uh… is Orel going to be fine with that, though? … I know this is a whole different dimension, but, back there, with Kar, he didn’t seem like the most open minded of guys…”

“You’d be surprised,” Jackie noted with a chuckle. “He is actually plenty open minded. It’s just the demons and dark magic stuff that he is dead set against. Besides, it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Uh, what do you mean?” Marco asked.

“I told you back on Earth, I think,” she smiled sheepishly. “That the thing with you and Star was not quite a one off thing. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve never been as happy as I was back then, with the two of you. Although, well, the circumstances might have helped…”

Circumstances like not being involved in fighting a decade-long guerrilla war, Marco imagined.

“… the point is,” Jackie continued. “Being tied to one person is something I can do, but it’s not really my favorite thing. So, me an Orel, we have both dated others before. He actually knows a lot about you already, and I just asked him about this before I came to talk to you, so it’s not like he expects anything different. Assuming you are okay with…”

“Wait,” Marco stopped her. “How many people have you dated since we last met?”

He wasn’t angry about it at all, actually. Just, well, kinda curious, and maybe a bit intimidated.

“Um, well, a few,” Jackie shuffled nervously. “Hey! How about you, though? How many people did you date the first time you were in Hekapoo’s domain? If I recall correctly, we were dating exclusively back then!” She mock-pouted. At least Marco hoped that was a mock-pout.

“I… I… I literally don’t remember,” Marco stammered.

It was the truth. After all, most of his memories from back then were still sealed away. He remembered Allion, of course, but not the details of their relationship, let alone anyone else that he might have known for a shorter stretch of time. He kept getting more and more dreams, but most of those had nothing to do with girls or dating, unfortunately.

“Then neither do I,” replied Jackie with a wink.

“Heh. Alright, I guess that’s fair,” Marco shrugged. He wrapped his arm around Jackie’s waist, suddenly feeling like a huge weight had been lifted from his chest.

“So, do I need to call you ‘my knight captain’ now too?” he joked.
“Oh, please don’t!” Jackie laughed.

----

They talked a bit more after that. But all good things do come to an end, and so had dinner, and so had her little chat with Marco. Having him back, despite all the intervening years, brought some much needed relief to Jackie’s mind. It was less like waking up from a nightmare, and more like realizing, while still dreaming, that you are once again having your favorite dream, if only for a little while.

Soon enough, however, reality asserted itself once again.

She and Marco had gone to fetch Orel from what was left of her celebrating troops. It had been hard to spin the last raid as a victory. But any mission where they didn’t all die was, in the minds of most, a cause for celebration.

The mage had made his excuses, and followed the other two up the stone stairs, all the way to the topmost cavern chamber. It wasn’t any larger than the others, or any fancier than the others. But command did have one particular perk with the air raiders: it was the only one with it’s own protruding ledge and enclosed stable outside.

On it, already waiting for her, was Pearl.

Jackie reached out to massage the dragoncycle’s neck and snout. She roared happily. Roared like a motorcycle roars, not a dragon. She always slept up here, outside Jackie’s room, even when they dismounted together with the full group at the main stables. The logic was simple: in case of an attack, the knight captain could see the entire extent of the cavern and, at the same time, jump into battle at a moment notice. They had yet to need to put that system to the test, the cave was pretty well hidden in the middle of the so-called Endless Chasm, but it was always worth it having a plan in place. Besides, Jackie liked having Pearl around.

Marco was chatting with Orel. They still seemed somewhat ill at ease, but it was getting better, she thought.

“So, how come you can speak English too?” Marco asked. “Did Jackie teach you or…?”

“Oh, she didn’t explain? I am not from around here either,” he said. “I’ve been to a few places, and have had the good fortune of being able to learn a few different tongues.”

He proceeded to say something Jackie only vaguely followed, in the lost tongue of this world.

“Whoa! You speak Riradesh too?” Marco exclaimed, surprised.

Ok, fine, they were getting along great. Better than she had expected given the few hiccups earlier that day, actually! It wasn’t too surprising, the two boys were more similar than they probably realized.

Jackie still felt she should have given Marco a little more warning, before asking him out again. That she ought to have told him a bit more about what he was getting into. The truth was, she couldn’t bring herself to do so. She missed him, more than she missed anyone else, except perhaps, well, Star.

Jackie looked down at the nacre scabbard and steeled herself, driving away all self-doubt. She forged her determination into the hardness of diamond, wrapping it like an armor around herself.
“Ok, sorry to bring it up,” she interrupted the two boys’ conversation, as they pushed aside the curtain to her chambers. “But we need to compare notes, about Midnight, about Star.”

She walked to a small niche in the wall, and carefully deposited Sam’s magic sword on it, scabbard and all. She felt a sense of relief wash over her as she did.

“We have been collecting some information on the so called deity of this world,” Orel pointed out, showing Marco Jackie’s bookshelf and stone planning table. “Those are all books we, ahem, commandeered from the dusk priesthood.”

“He means ‘stole’,“ Jackie explained, sitting down on the sleeping mat by the floor. “He just can’t admit it.”

“That’s not quite true. I can say that I… that we st… stole those tomes. Stealing from the wicked is no sin if it’s done to prevent a greater evil!” Orel exclaimed indignantly, and Jackie laughed a bit at that. He was always so easy to rile about this sort of stuff. Good old, goody-two-shoes Orel.

“Look, the point is, we have all these stuff about how ‘the deity’ works, about her ‘miracles’, and the destruction she’s wrought upon this world. But there is something that is missing, some link that tells us how exactly did Star snap this badly, and what does she want,” she explained. “Her church keeps talking about her being in pain, and needing to reunite with the deity of light. Some people think it’s the old deity of this world. That would be, um, Hekapoo, right?”

Marco hadn’t thought of it.

“But that doesn’t seem right,” she continued. “Hekapoo is dead…”

“Actually, I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Marco pointed out. “I still think the dream I had back on Earth was real. Hekapoo is out there somewhere.”

“Alright,” Orel picked it up from there. “Then that remains an option. Maybe Midnight is seeking out the Forger of Scissors to destroy her fully, if she is still around. After all, her existence might be why Midnight currently only claims partial domain over this world. If so, then the rest of that tale, about the reuniting with her is just a lie created by Midnight herself. Although, Marco, I must warn you, we have come across no signs of the Forger being alive. Also, well, there is a competing theory…”

“Uh?” Marco asked. “Which is?”

“That she is looking for you,” Jackie explained. “I mean, I think it’s pretty obvious. If Midnight really is Star - and, well, there is some debate there too, but she definitely sounds like her to me - then she would want to get back together with you. Your souls are bonded under the Blood Moon and under whatever that awful seeing eye spell did to us.”

“But, Jackie, aren’t all three of our souls bonded?” Marco asked.

“Yeah, that’s the part that doesn’t add up,” Jackie continued. “She has definitely tried to get hold of me, but that goal doesn’t explain even half of her actions, never mind those of her supposed priesthood. And even when she is going after me… I dunno. Look, remember this morning? It was weird, Marco. We got away and her spells followed us, but she stayed behind. Why didn’t she enclose us in a large magic barrier? Or gave herself wings? Or even created a few more warnicorns? It still feels like, if she was really trying to capture us back there, she could have done so easily enough. Something still doesn’t fit.”

“Maybe there is a limit to the spells she can cast when possessing somebody else?” Marco asked.
“Have you guys seen her do any of that stuff while working through one of her… avatars, was it?”

“We have not,” Orel admitted.

“Actually, this is the first time we have seen her use the magic wand, or something that looks like the magic wand. That’s what confuses me the most about our escape,” Jackie admitted. “So, if she can do that. Why hasn’t she before? It still feels like the only reason we have managed to resist her these thirteen years, is that she was not putting all of her efforts into coming after us.” She meant the air raiders, and she meant herself specifically.

“She is also trying to bring back her mom,” Marco pointed out.

“Bring her back? As in from the dead!?” Orel exclaimed. “Divine grace above! That’s just not possible!”

“Isn’t it?” Marco asked, weakly. “Because she claims to have already revived people before. But, she also said… she said…” Marco seemed worried for a moment about what he was about to say. “… she said that the people in here are not real. That they are like her spells.”

Jackie’s eyes widened. Orel had said something similar to her, although not nearly as harshly, back when Gwen had died. He had probably thought that would help Jackie cope. It hadn’t, actually. Not in the least.

Of all the people Midnight had taken from them, Gwendolyn was probably the one Jackie missed the most. She had been one of their partners, as much hers and she was Orel’s. More, if she was being honest. She had been the perfect complement to the two of them, just like Star had been the perfect complement to her and Marco. If Gwen hadn’t been real, then ‘real’ had no meaning at all.

But never mind those thoughts. Jackie pushed them away, annoyed at herself. She wasn’t carrying the blade, but she still could not afford to dwell on stuff like that right now. They had a conversation to finish.

“There is certainly a different ontological source to those who live in this dimension,” Orel explained. “But that doesn’t make them any less real. Their thoughts are every bit as complex as ours, their emotions just as vivid as your own. Their souls are… complicated. Marco, how much do you know about what this world was created for?”

Marco nodded, knowingly. “The scissor quest.”

“Precisely. This domain was built directly by Hekapoo, and out of Hekapoo. The people here are different because of that. Midnight, um, ‘Star’, has claimed this place for her own, so she can do things to those existing here that she could never do to those of us who come from outside,” Orel finished.

“Wait! You mean you also aren’t from this dimension?” Marco asked.

Jackie realized that was one more thing they probably should have told him earlier as well, though it wasn’t exactly something that often came up in conversation.

“As I said, I’ve been to a few places. I am not from any of the three dimensions conforming this domain,” the other boy confirmed. “I am a traveler, like you two. I was coming to check on the Forger, after the scissors began failing, but I admit I wasn’t quite prepared for what I found…”

“So, you are also a scissor quest champion?” Marco seemed rather surprised at this.
“Well, something like that, but, no, I do not have that honor,” Orel deflected. He hadn’t even told Jackie that much about his past, actually, other than the fact that he was also a dimensional traveler. “Getting back to the point: I do not believe Midnight could ever revive someone who lived and died outside of the Forger’s domain.”

“Star certainly seems to think she can,” Marco pointed out.

Jackie frowned. She had only really interacted with their former friend at length once or twice after she came to this world, unless you counted running away as interacting.

Star had received her at the dimensional gateway, in the guise of some other girl, another of her avatars. It hadn’t gone well. If not for the crystal blade, Jackie might have never been able to escape her. Not that she was proud of what she had done that day, of course. Nor half the things she had done after.

The mewman princess had been trying to ask her to join her, to find Marco together, but she had sounded so off, so… unhinged.

“I guess a few thousand years are more than enough for anyone’s mind to end up, well,” Jackie sighed, “not fully there.”

“A few thousand years?” Marco remarked, shocked.

“Yeah,” Jackie confirmed, gloomily. “According to these books, that’s about has long Midnight has been around, at least. It’s hard to tell, because the timekeeping system changes so often. But the priesthood of dusk, the order that worships her, is certainly at least five hundred years old by itself…”

Marco stood frozen there, as if he couldn’t quite process that. She couldn’t blame him, actually. It was a lot to take in, particularly for him, who had been in this world less than two months. She herself wasn’t sure it had sunk in for her yet that Star was six or seven times older now than they would ever get to be.

“Then that cannot be Star,” Marco said, finally. “Midnight is not Star. Or, at least, Midnight five hundred years ago was certainly not Star!”

“Look, dude, I know it’s a lot to take in, but…” she said, putting her hand on his shoulder in a comforting gesture.

“No, Jackie,” Marco said. He was looking up at her, confused still, but with a hopeful look in his eyes. “I only took about an hour to go up that staircase. I am certain of that! Even if she had gone inside the moment I fell down, even if she lied to me when she said it had been decades… even then, there is no way that Star arrived to this dimension much more than a hundred years before us!”

The realization hit Jackie like a lightning strike.

She should have known. She ought to have figured it out back when Marco was telling the story, back when they were riding home. She couldn’t have known before. After all, she was unconscious when Star crossed the portal. As far as she knew, she could have been out for hours, even days. But she knew what the time differential was, and if Marco had not taken more than an hour to follow in after Star, then there was no way that the deity mentioned in these people’s books was her!

*And the deity cut a wound in the sky that rained fire upon the earth and waters. The seas boiled, the mountains trembled, and men were cast out from the serenity of the star-filled heavens, and*
into the darkness of the long reign of Midnight…’

Not Star.

‘And the deity broke apart the heavenly rock, and its rubble blanketed the whole length and width of the world’

Not Star.

‘Oh! Hi Jackie! Long time not see!’

‘I call the darkness unto me…’

No! That definitely had been Star! The one who had, just this morning, been trying to kill her, or maim her.

The one taking over the body of a mute girl and hurling fireballs their way? The one drafting entire villages to join her fanatical army of priests? The creator of the monstrous warnicorn spells? The person responsible for what happened to Gwendolyn, to Adalheidis, to Kara, to Eirikr, to Ythul, to… so many. Too many to count. That person had always sounded so much like Star. Had known things only Star would have known. Had acted in ways Jackie could imagine only Star acting!

Even if Star wasn’t the deity who had destroyed the moon, or the one who had created this hellish world, she was still the one who had created the monsters that inhabited it. She was the one who had stalked Jackie across continents. She was the one who had murdered every single person that had ever been close to her since he ever came into this accursed world. Other than Orel, that is, and it wasn’t for lack of trying…

“Jackie? Jackie? Are you ok?” she heard Marco’s voice, sounding distant, even though he was right in front of him.

She hadn’t even realized when she started crying.

“It’s alright,” Orel reassured her. Or, maybe, he reassured Marco. “Jackie, let it all out. You don’t have the sword now. It’s just the three of us. It is alright. You are safe.”

Her breath was fast, her head racing with the maelstrom of emotion and pain that she kept buried under the mask of the invincible knight captain of the air raiders. Emotions that she could never risk showing while she was in front of her men. But, most important of all, that she could never allow herself to feel, even for a second, while holding the glass sword.

‘Nothing shall break it as long as you have the will to continue to wield it.’

Fuck you, Sam! Fuck you so much!

She didn’t know how she knew it. He probably had somehow mindfucked the knowledge into her head or something! But she knew exactly what those words truly meant. The blade was invincible only so long as Jackie had the will to wield it, and only for as long as that held, with absolute certainty. A single second of pause with the pommel in her hands, and she could feel it growing brittle. A moment of weakness with it by her side, and she could hear it rattle inside the scabbard, about to break against the metal from the vibration of her steps alone. If she cried while raising the blade, if she allowed herself to break down, like she was doing just now, while it lay by her side, then it would be lost forever. Without the blade, they would all be hopeless.

That had been Sam’s final cruel joke towards her. His answer to her defiant ‘why not?’
Because, given enough time, fighting an unwinnable war always became unbearable, no matter how brave or stoic or unflappable you were. Because you really couldn’t keep standing up and charging forever. Because human will was not any more infinite a resource than human strength was.

She used to think she had to don a mask of coolness back in Echo Creek. That she had to bury down her insecurities. Hah! She hadn’t had a clue! The mask of the knight captain was as hard and heavy as iron.

And that was not even getting into her romantic life! The thing in the stairs, Wish, it had hinted that Star’s spell had changed things so that Marco and Star could be together. Jackie had done some thinking about that, in all those years, and the idea left her ever more unsettled. Had that change included her? Had the spell changed her? Had it changed who she was?

Star had been the first girl that Jackie had been attracted to, ever. And her relationship with her and Marco the first time that she had truly, seriously, considered dating more than one person at once. She liked to think that she had always been curious about the later. That it was just what she did. What she wanted. It was certainly the way she was the happiest. She loved Orel, and they were good together, but Jackie liked it best when they weren’t alone. She had been like that with Gwen, and Erickr, and Adal, and all the others before and in between.

But what if that was part of the change? What if Star’s spell had rewritten her somehow? The person she was supposed to be? What if she was just as much under her thrall as that Silence girl? What if she simply didn’t know it?

It wasn’t much. Not compared to all the death and devastation of this world, to all the battles and skirmishes, to the fallen friends and loved ones, to the last thirteen years of her life. But it still worried her. It still felt, if it was true, like a violation. And it certainly didn’t help that, for all that had happened, for all that she had seen… Jackie still missed Star.

She missed her just as much as she had missed Marco. She missed her smile, and her crazy hijinks, and her effortless unworried way to make everything shine around her.

Yet she didn’t know, not with any real certainty, if any of those feelings were her own.

“Um, Marco, guess I should have warned you before, back there when you were agreeing to be my boyfriend again,” Jackie smiled weakly under the tears. “But, um, dude… I am kind of a mess.”

Chapter End Notes

So, that's the spoiler... by Jackie’s dating life going a different way, what I meant is that her ISTASE version is clearly bisexual! (She wasn't always going to be, but she was going to be since Part III ended, way before I saw S04xE15)

This is a bit of a departure from canon, though. Since, as far as I can tell, canon hints pretty strongly that she is exclusively (or very much primarily) into girls, and that it couldn’t have worked with Marco due to that alone (Or could it? I look forward to a number of gay-Jackie trans-Marco fics popping up in the future. But I digress...).

The canon revelation, and the note above, also means that some of Jackie’s fears in
that last scene are quite unfounded. But, still, even if Star’s spell didn’t change her sexual orientation. Did it perhaps change other aspects of her mind? We shall see!

Also, please note that in that first scene, Jackie is likely not thinking in English or Latin. The name “Aestus Memoria” is part of the translation convention and the original words would certainly be in Riradesh (this world’s “ancient language”). Neither me nor the original Habit authors have created any detailed phonetics for Riradesh, and am I certainly not going to try! I’ll leave the proper conlangs to the experts. Vaguely hinting at the writing system stuff is complex enough for me ;)

Well, I have ranted long enough...

**Coming up next:** *Chapter 37: Days of the Air Raiders*
Days of the Air Raiders

Chapter Summary

In which Marco learns to fight, fly, maybe crow, and APW remembers that this is still supposed to be a smut fic!

Chapter Notes

“The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease for ever to be able to do it.”
M. Barrie, Peter Pan

This chapter has a few smut scenes, of varying length, but does not end in one. The first such scene ends very quickly after it gets truly started. Technically all these are minor spoilers, but I suspect there are readers who might want to know all that, for, um, reasons…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 37: Days of the Air Raiders

There was nothing, in this world or any other, quite like the thrill of flying. Not canned up inside an airplane, like a sardine, of course, but out there in the open, with the breeze against your skin and all the troubles of the world literally beneath you.

On some level or another, Jackie had always known this to be true.

She had tasted that same thrill long before she had first left Earth. She’d been drawn to the clouds long before she became the knight captain of the air raiders. She had flown, however briefly, back when she was just a naive little girl with her skateboard, needing ramps and the built-up momentum of rolling wheels to touch the sky.

Riding a griffon was better than riding a skateboard. There was no doubt about it. The half-falcon half-leopard beast swam in the wind. It danced on the thermals. Its powerful wings barely exerted themselves as the magnificently intuitive flying creature let the currents guide it up, and down, and forward. Orel, holding the reins, had but to hint at a direction, and the soaring cat would take them there, graceful and swift. Their flight was so smooth that she didn’t really need to hold on to the strong earnest man in front of her. She held tightly anyways, simply because she enjoyed doing so.

Riding a dragoncycle, however, was even better than riding a griffon. A good dragoncycle could zoom through the air like a jet plane, and make it feel as smooth as if you were standing still on a mild breeze. Astride Pearl, even the last thirteen years of horror often seemed to slide away with the wind. Astride Pearl, Jackie’s mind was always a calm ocean, her confidence unbreakable, and so too Sam’s accursed glass blade. As much as she enjoyed being this close to Orel, and as much as she appreciated hitching a ride on Sunbolt - the man’s other, feathered, life-partner - on some level
or another she still felt she was missing out...

Jackie only hoped that Marco was appreciating the opportunity in her stead!

“Whoa Diaz, you are a natural at this!” she shouted at him as the boy dashed by where Orel and her were flying.

“Not really,” he retorted, circling around and reducing his own speed to match theirs, so they could chat. “I kind of have done this before.”

“Really? I thought you didn’t remember,” she pointed out.

“Well, you know what they say,” he added, lightly scratching Pearl’s neck. “It’s like riding a dragoncycle!” he joked. Jackie rolled her eyes.

Pearl seemed to like Marco too. Not that Jackie was in any way surprised by that. Who wouldn’t? The boy was still the same adorable charming kid she remembered, but now was build like goddamn hercules! And that was without mentioning the voice. Oh god, the voice! Ok, fine, that wasn’t about Pearl at all… that was all her.

“Marco, we are approaching the target,” Orel announced, all business, of course. “When you spot it, do a single round of bombardment, and make sure to maintain altitude. We should be safe up here.”

“Um, sure, man, but, do I even know what I should be looking for?” Marco asked, hesitant.

“Oh, don’t worry, dude,” Jackie reassured him, grinning broadly. “You’ll know. They are really hard to miss, actually.”

She wasn’t being evasive just for her own amusement. This was the way the conditions of the test were usually set up. Every recruit of the air raiders who wanted to be considered for a griffon assignment went into it knowing no more and no less than Marco knew now. It wasn’t dangerous, though, not if they could fly their mount and listen to instructions.

After less than a month, Marco was already the fifth best flier in the raiders, and the only one besides her that could ride Pearl at top speed. This should be a cakewalk for him. And yet, Jackie couldn’t help but to be a little nervous, deep inside, where maybe not even Sam’s sword could see it.

To the east, a plume of sand rose from the desert, like the mushroom cloud of an explosion far below them. Jackie hadn’t expected it to seem quite this tall from quite this far away. In a way, that simply made it easier.

“There!” she pointed out. “Remember, Marco, it’s a test of aim. Do not close in on the target. You can dive one hundred for momentum, and not a single more.”

It wasn’t a test of aim. The point wasn’t whether you could hit it, that was mostly luck at this height, the point was your reaction to the creature.

Marco whooshed past them, keeping altitude. There was another plume of sand, higher, closer, but still out of range. Jackie saw the huge mass ripple through the sand, like a cresting wave among the dunes: the beast moving below ground, getting ready to emerge.

Marco dove, his hand holding the knife close against the release line. Pearl was carrying two separate canisters, each set to release eight of the solid bombardment projectiles. All Marco had to
do was cut one of them lose right as the creature jumped at him. The large flechettes could actually
down the beast, if at least a few of them went inside the open mouth. Otherwise, well, he was still
flying well out of reach.

Jackie had seen this go down dozens of times. She had seen recruits panic hard and still live. She
had seen them get in a lucky hit and kill the creature. She mostly saw them miss and fly up; follow
the instructions, keep their nerves, and thus, pass the test.

She had seen it go down so many times that she didn’t even pay attention to the size of the wave of
sand below them. She didn’t see the glass lakes nearby crack under the force of the tremor, even at
a distance far beyond what could have been reasonably expected.

The horn that sprouted from the depths of the desert like a rising mountain was thrice as long as
any Jackie had ever seen. The tar-black hide of the monstruos whale broke the surface with the
strength of a volcanic eruption. It was only then that Jackie realized something was wrong.

“Marco! Fly up! That’s not a normal one!” she shouted, but the roar of sand exploding out drowned
her voice, even this far up.

Orel didn’t need her to say a word. He guided their mount in pursuit of Marco and Pearl, swift and
determined.

Too late.

Sunbolt was the fastest griffon that had ever flown with the raiders, but even he couldn’t outrace a
dragoncycle. Pearl might have known something was wrong, she might have tried to fly up, if
she’d been on her own. But a good dragoncycle follows her rider, and right now she and Marco
were diving down, towards the jumping beast.

It emerged fully. The horn was the length of an olympic stadium, and the body twice that size. Six
glowing red eyes arrayed themselves along the sides of its massive whale head. A dozen inchoate
tentacles grew out of the beast’s hump, reaching out towards the diving dragoncycle. It was the
biggest goddamn Land Narwhal Jackie had ever seen! It made Earth’s largest whales look like
infant dolphins by comparison.

“Marco! No!” she shouted, as the beast flew up, mouth open wide, three rows of sharp teeth at the
ready.

The boy cut the rope, and the flechettes fell right inside the narwhal’s mouth, all eight of them.
Several hit the middle of its tongue, yet bounced harmlessly off it. A few more graced its gigantic
teeth, barely leaving a scratch. The fangs of the beast closed around where Marco and Pearl had
been a second ago.

There was the sound of thunder from above.

Jackie felt her heart sink. No, not again, not like this!

“Well, Jack, you did it again after all, didn’t you?” came a mocking female voice from behind her,
and she thought she could hear a note of accusation mixed in within the broader sneering tone. “Why? Didn’t you swear you had
had enough? Didn’t you promise yourself I was going to be the last? Or was that Adal?”

The knight captain turned her mount around, tugging at it by the reins. It was still Sunbeam, Orel’s
half-falcon half-leopard griffon, but the mage was gone now, Jackie was the only one around.
Jackie, and the redheaded girl flying atop one of Midnight’s shadows. The terrifying flying
unicorn, made of iron and bone, seemed to stare mockingly at the knight captain.
“Gwen!?” Jackie cried out.

“No,” Gwendolyn replied, mounted atop the same fell warncorn that had gored her before, her chest bleeding through the fabric of her shirt, as it too frayed apart. Eventually, there was a head-sized hole there, such that Jackie could see all the way through to the stormy skies behind her. It had been a clear day a moment before. “Never again. And you know why?”

Gwen became sickly pale at that point, chalk pale, pale like… snow.

The knight captain drew her glass sword, and charged against the figure. Princess White hollered at her from above the undead horse, cackling maniacally.

“Because you couldn’t just say yes…” The vampire princess transformed yet again, not back into twenty-six year old Gwendolyn, but into a fifteen year old Star Butterfly. “… to me.”

Jackie slashed at her neck with Sam’s mighty blade.

The sword broke into a storm of glass shards.

“Jackie. Poor naive dumb Jackie.” Star shook her head. “That only works if you really mean it, you know? So, make up your mind… do you hate me? … or do you love me?”

The knight captain fell down from the griffon, down towards the desert, down towards an empty void.

----

“No!” Jackie yelled, gasping awake.

Besides her, a shirtless and somewhat groggy Marco held her by the shoulders, a concerned expression on his face.

“Shush. It’s ok, Jackie, it’s ok. It was just a dream,” he reassured her.

It was. Of course it was. But it had felt so real. Besides, part of it hadn’t been a dream. The wound. The wound in Gwen’s chest. The warncorn. She had been there. Jackie had been there, when that wound was made. That had been real. It hadn’t been tonight, but it had been real. How long ago had it been? Four years? Five? And, Marco…

“The Land Narwhal… it was the biggest one I’ve ever seen.... It ate you! ...you were doing the initiation test and…” she tried to explain.

“Jackie, that was just a dream. That’s not what happened,” Marco reminded her, calmly. “My initiation test was yesterday. I was pretty shocked at seeing what Star’s narwhals had become, so I missed my first shot. But Kar popped out and threw the second round of flechettes at it. The canister opened at an angle, but it still worked. He killed it. You said that we didn’t have to, that we both had passed the moment we didn’t completely freak out at the thing. I retorted that I was a little freaked out…”

It was all coming back now, of course. The Land Narwhal had been normal-sized, meaning about the size of a blue whale, not counting the tentacles. Marco had indeed panicked a little, mostly because he had recognized what the creature was, which was a factor no one else had to deal with before during that particular test. But he had kept altitude, and never been in any risk. They had flown back and Marco had been formally made a full air raider, even if there wasn’t yet a mount available for him.
Since Marco had only been with them a fortnight at the most, that technically made him the fastest person to go from recruit to mount-ready since Orel and her had invented that particular test. Sure, as he’d say, he had experience flying a dragoncycle before, but it was still impressive. Faster than Sigrun, or Grall, or Adalheidis, or...

“...who is Gwen?” Marco asked, as if he could read her mind.

Jackie had tuned out most of Marco’s recollections, lost in her own memories. But, somehow, that question had still filtered through. She frowned.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry,” he continued. “But you kind of were yelling her name, along with mine and, well… you know.”

Star’s. He meant to not-say she had been crying out Star’s name.

Jackie took a deep breath. She figured she might as well give Marco the cliffnotes on that. Chances were, this wouldn’t be the last time she woke up from a nightmare calling out that name. Orel could attest that it certainly wasn’t the first. Nor was that the only name. Not by a long shot.

“Gwendolyn was a girl I dated. I mean, a girl that Orel and I dated.” Marco, thankfully, made no comment about that. “She was… well, it doesn’t matter now. She was an air raider too. She died in the line of duty.”

In a way, that was the same as saying that Jackie had killed her. The decision of what was or wasn’t the line of duty for the air raiders, after all, rested solely in the shoulders of their knight captain.

“I am sorry, Jackie,” Marco said, holding her closer towards him.

“She wasn’t the first,” she muttered.

Not the first air raider to die in the fight, nor the first of her lovers to be killed due to their association with her.

“But she was special to you?” Marco asked.

“Yes.” Gwen had been special to her indeed. But even in that, she wasn’t unique. Adal, Erickr, Kara… she had loved all of them, dearly, and they had loved her, and they had all met their end because of that. “Marco, look, it was after Gwen that Orel and I stopped looking for other people. It just puts them in danger. More danger than even being an air raider by itself. Sometimes I think Star is specifically targeting those who get close to me… maybe we two also shouldn’t…”

She felt his lips on the side of her forehead, as a pair of powerful arms embraced her from behind. Somehow, Marco had positioned himself so that she was resting comfortably atop his own sitting body, using his muscular chest as a pillow.

“Jackie,” he replied, calmly. “I love you, and I am pretty sure being with you is not going to get me in any trouble with Star in which I am not already. I’d worry about the opposite, but that seems pretty difficult as well…”

“Heh,” the knight captain chuckled, a grin slowly making its way back her lips. “Who knows, Marco? She is pretty pissed at me. You, she probably just wants to bone again…”

“Well, I’d love to be able to help her, but you need to be at least this non-homicidal to get on this ride!” He held his hand up right besides Jackie’s head.
“Marco, that was terrible!” she complained, elbowing him away without much conviction. She had to admit: it had made her smile.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “It kinda was. Um.. sorry, Jackie.”

“Uh-huh…” she replied, noncommittally.

Jackie was feeling a lot better, though, and with that, she started to take further notice of her present situation. The pair of strong manly arms around her. The broad pectorals right behind her head. The rock-solid protrusion below her, pushing up from her otherwise quite comfortable human seat. It was morning and Marco had just woken up too, after all!

“So, Diaz, somewhat relevant question: do you think I can get on this ride?” she asked coyly, rocking herself gently against her boyfriend’s lap.

Before Marco could respond, Jackie swiftly turned herself around, straddling the boy face to face, and planting a kiss right on his lips. She felt those powerful hands take hold of her waist in response. Shivers of anticipation ran through her spine.

The knight captain swayed forwards and backwards, pressing her legs against Marco’s sides, as if he were an untamed griffon she wanted to direct upwards in flight. She broke the kiss and the man in front of her gasped.

No matter how many times they did this, or how many days passed since that on which she had found Marco again, she still couldn’t come to terms with the fact that her teenage boyfriend was this beefcake of a man. The way he was staring at her naked grown-up chest, Jackie imagined the surprise must be quite mutual.

They both slept in the buff, with only the blankets around them. Right now, those were mostly just in the way. She lifted herself up, reluctantly, from her lover’s lap, and pulled aside the fabric with a single hand. She smiled as she saw the impressive and readily erect member below her. It wasn’t just Marco’s muscles that had gotten bigger either.

“Well, my knight captain, ready for your ride?” he asked in that sexy deep confident voice that he only occasionally used.

If she wasn’t ready before he asked, she certainly was after. That voice of his was just unfair! Jackie even forgot to be annoyed that he had picked up the habit of calling her by her title too, just like Orel.

“Are you?” she teased him back, recovering only the smallest bit of her own composure. She ran her fingers over his powerful abs, and her welcoming crotch over the expectant tip below.

He ran his own over her hair, on the scar’s side. “Any time, J.”

That goddamn voice!

Jackie grinned, and lowered herself down, guiding Marco’s arms to her chest and leaning forward for another deep long kiss. It wasn’t at all like flying, and it wasn’t like riding a dragoncycle. But, in some ways, it was even better. It was the powerful thrusts of a wild buck, and the tender caresses of her first love, all rolled into the same amazing wondrous person.

Marco was her teenage boyfriend, her childhood friend, the person she knew and trusted the most. He was also, in a way, a new and very attractive stranger, a body that she had just begun to explore and who was eager to explore her own. It was love, and passion, and that death-spitting quality that
all good sex in this fucked-up dimension had to it. ‘Today we revel, for tomorrow we may be
dead.’ The fact that he had the stamina of a goddamn stallion didn’t hurt either!

By the time they dressed up and made their way back to meet Orel’s returning patrol, the
nightmare had been long forgotten and Jackie felt more sure of herself than she had in months.

The glass sword would not break that day.

----

“Thanks, Sigrun,” Marco said to the stout dark-skinned warrior woman, in what he hoped was a
passable version of her own native tongue. She grinned, amused, and poured him another mug of
cactus mead. She reminded him, vaguely, of someone, but he couldn’t quite recall who.

Besides him, Orel was holding up a tiny prickly-pear sort of fruit, and Jackie kept her mouth wide
open for him to feed it to her. She held her tongue out, exaggeratedly beckoning the man to deliver
the bite-sized fruit, in a way that was just a shade more comical than it was sexy.

Marco smiled. It was that sort of moment, more than anything else, that reminded him of the Jackie
he had known only a few months ago. It was reassuring that, no matter how battle-hardened she
had become, there was still a goofy side to her when she managed to relax, just as there had been
before, beneath all her undeniable coolness back in Echo Creek.

Sure, he envied Orel a bit in the moment. But, in the face of seeing Jackie this happy, that didn’t
seem to matter nearly as much. It mattered less and less the more Marco got to know the mage, and
vice versa. The process hadn’t been automatic, by any means, but the human boy had to admit that
getting used to this new version of his relationship with Jackie wasn’t quite as hard as he had first
imagined. Besides, after the way things had worked out for him before, back on Earth, he certainly
owed her to try the other way around.

“So, Marco, one thing I don’t quite understand, and please feel free not to answer if it’s a sensitive
topic,” Orel prefaced his question, unfailingly polite, as he ever was when Kar was not involved.
“If the memories of your scissors’ quest were sealed away, and have been steadily returning to you
through dreams, does that mean you also have the thoughts of two different people? An older and
younger version of yourself, so to speak?”

Whoa! Marco hadn’t even thought about that! Not even as a possibility. He considered his answer
for a second, his eyes drifting over the increasingly inebriated crowd of rebels around them, those
of them on guard duty excepted.

“Well, no, not really. It’s not like I am thinking two sets of thoughts right now…” Well, he was, but
that was just Kar, and Orel didn’t usually want to hear anything that had anything to do with Kar.
“It’s more like… during the dreams, I do think like a slightly different person, like ‘Marco of
Zonst’ or whatever. Then, when I wake up, I remember what he would have done, and some of his
memories, in addition to those events which are actually happening inside the dream. So, I
incorporate that experience. It becomes part of me, sure, but it’s not like I am turning into that
Marco. It feels more like taking an accelerated course on being that version of me. I am learning
from those experiences, bit by bit, but I am still me, because, deep down, that other version is also
me…”

Ugh. He sure as hell wasn’t explaining it very well!

While the three of them spoke, some of the other air raiders had begun to dance by the fire, to the
rhythm of drums and claps from their fellow soldiers. Marco saw Sigrun grab hold of a young
lanky man in his late teens, and practically swing him around in the air like a rag doll in their mutual drunken celebration. The rest of the couples were less oddly matched, but no less enthusiastic. The air raiders always partied like each night could well be their last, for quite understandable, and straightforward, reasons.

“Um, Marco, so, does that mean you are still fifteen years old on the inside?” Jackie asked, seeming a bit worried. “I hope that doesn’t make it, us, well, you know…”

Marco smiled. Really? That was Jackie’s question? Whether he was still so much of a kid that she was cradle-robbing on him or something?

He looked around, and wondered: these soldiers, these seasoned veterans in their early twenties, when had they first needed to learn how to fight? How many of them had been married and widowed before they even became flying freedom fighters? Being an adult meant something different here, and Jackie knew it! But perhaps she thought that didn’t apply to him. He had left Echo Creek just a month ago, after all.

But that was only this second time around...

“I don’t feel fifteen,” he declared. “And I don’t feel in my thirties either. It’s probably something in between. But, look, Jackie, any way you slice it now, chronologically, physiologically, or mentally, I already have more life behind me than most people in here do before they die.” People didn’t often live to be very old in Hekapoo’s dimension, even back the first time Marco was here.

He let his voice drop a note or two, just the way he knew she liked it. “I have experiences and memories no fifteen year old should have, Jackie. The sight of my gorgeous girlfriend by candlelight is, among all those experiences, the only one that I would have wanted to have had as a fifteen year old boy,” he declared.

Jackie actually blushed at that. So, who was it that was the teenager here, then? Marco smiled again.

Come to think of it, both of them had missed out on some part of what meant to grow-up, according to Earth standards. Yet they both experienced other forms of growing up, which most adults back in Echo Creek, fortunately, knew nothing about.

“Ok, sure. I suppose I can imagine, say, Ferguson and Alfonzo feeling pretty jealous of your position, Marco.” Jackie shrugged, dismissing the awkward thought. “Not to mention that more than a few girls in school would be just as jealous of mine,” she made a show of biting her lower lip as she looked directly at his exposed abs.

Marco grinned at that. He didn’t know who the two guys she was talking about were. Both those sounded like Echo Creek names to him, though, not people from this dimension.

Jackie’s friends from skateboard camp, perhaps?

----

“Marco was right, you know?” Orel declared. “It is a thing of heavenly beauty, by candle light or any other.”

Jackie rolled her eyes, but smiled nonetheless as the mage’s eyes roamed over the length of her naked body. There were indeed candles, set on a few niches in the cavern wall. They were meant, ostensibly, only to provide enough illumination for their nightly ablutions. The moment Orel had followed her into the bath chamber, Jackie had known they had other plans.
“You have seen it before, and that was in the sunlight,” Jackie retorted, “and also before it had quite this many scars.”

He walked towards her, graceful and composed like only Orel could, beaming that reassuring sunny smile of his. “Less than anyone else who has fought for this long.”

Jackie laughed, and pointed her finger at the man’s chest, tracing softly the contour of his lean muscles. He was Sinbad to Marco’s Hercules. His bronze skin ever unblemished. “Anyone else but you, of course.”

“I am a healer, Jackie,” Orel retorted. “If there is ever a wound I can’t close in time, it will not leave a scar, it will leave a corpse.”

He said that without regret, without sadness, but the thought still made her wince. Before she could say something else, Orel’s hand was gently holding the left side of her face, and his lips upon her own. She melted into the kiss.

There was a hissing noise, and steam began filling the room. Jackie didn’t have to look down to figure out what had just happened. The mage had shot a tiny blast of flame at the middle of the water well besides them. It wasn’t a good thing to waste water like that, but Jackie couldn’t deny it felt good to have the warm fog condense again against her skin, enveloping her like a fine silk blanket.

She had no magic tricks of her own, and so she was forced to resort to the direct approach instead. She lowered both her hands, using the left to cup her lover’s buttcheek as the right took hold of his shaft. She pumped him lazily for a while, as they kissed, until Orel broke free first, letting out an entirely unselfconscious purr of pleasure, at once guttural and exquisite.

“My knight captain, allow me to serve at your pleasure,” he said, entirely straight-faced, as he knelt before her on one knee.

Jackie just chuckled. He had made that pun before. As she braced herself against the stone wall behind her, Orel’s solemn mask broke into a huge grin, and he leaned forward.

He began by kissing the inside of her tights. His lips planted kisses all over Jackie’s upper legs, then above, along her flat stomach. On the way, she felt his tongue draw the contours of her lower lips, without ever stepping inside her folds. The wait was torture, and yet it was a delightful one. She wiggled herself, trying to force the boy to misstep, but somehow he was always ahead of her.

“Orel… please,” she begged.

As if that were all he had ever been waiting for, the mage began licking along the length of her sex. His smooth tongue caressed her nub briefly, then darted back down again. It repeated the motion a few times, before Jackie felt it turn its attention back towards her clit, providing a warm and dexterous massage.

It was a symphony and Jackie was the instrument, his movements precise and dignified, even as she melted into a sloppy puddle under the man’s attentions, even as she trembled and moaned into the bath’s fog. Her breath raced faster and faster, in a controlled building crescendo that could only lead to an unrestrained explosion...

A pair of strong able arms supported her weight against the cavern wall when her own strength failed her. She came, hard, her weakening legs trembling around her lover’s face, his chin damp with her juices. It was bliss, pure heavenly bliss.
Slowly, the mage deposited her utterly relaxed form into the cavern floor. It took Jackie a while to be ready to stand again. Orel, then, insisted in helping her get washed.

By the time they made it back to their room, Marco had already long fallen asleep, waiting for the two of them.

---

Jackie swiveled on her right foot, letting herself flow backwards with the momentum of the strike, rather than meeting it head on. Her stance was unbroken, her smile was defiant, and the wooden staff in her hands unyielding to Marco’s powerful strike. He grinned back at her as he reversed the motion, striking as fast and as hard as he could towards her left side with the opposite end of his own improvised bo staff.

She blocked once again and the crowd cheered. A dozen or so already familiar faces clapping at the prowess of their leader, and enjoying the sport the newcomer provided her. It was clear which side they favored, of course, and Marco couldn’t blame them, but he was still fighting to win.

Jackie was currently on the defensive, but Marco knew she was just sizing him up, looking for an opening. They had picked staffs for their sparring - technically, headless spears, to be later outfitted with tips of iron before their use in battle - because it gave neither of them a clear advantage. He knew he could beat Jackie in hand-to-hand, and the knight captain would mop the floor with him in swordplay. With the spears, however, they were evenly matched.

‘Evenly matched as long as I stay in here,’ Kar pointed out from within the inner recesses of his mind.

Marco hit once, twice, three times, with as much strength as he could muster without leaving himself wide open. He did not intend on making things too easy for her, after all. Jackie’s staff expertly parried each strike.

Yeah, without Kar, and without the fierceness ritual, they were evenly matched. But, then again, Jackie was not using Sam’s blade, or her dragoncycle. So, really, it was a…

Marco jumped backwards and to the left, just in time to avoid a quick precise thrust of Jackie’s staff. The crowds shouted something. He wasn’t sure if it was a word he had learned yet, and he didn’t have the luxury of paying it much mind. Marco only hoped the laughter that followed wasn’t all at his expense.

Right. Focus on the fight! And for the love of god don’t give her any openings! She might be his teenage crush, but she was also a terrifyingly experienced fighter.

Jackie grinned at him, as the boy shuffled his feet back into a defensive stance. She didn’t press that advantage yet. Even without a sword in her hands, Jackie fought like a swordsman. She methodically probed her opponent, looking for the flaws in their defense, committing to an attack only when she was sure she was not inviting easy retaliation. She was fast, too, way faster than Marco was, even if he was significantly stronger.

Fortunately, he also had an ace under his sleeve, and he wasn’t talking about Kar…

“Ky-yah!” Marco yelled, as he swung with his staff towards Jackie’s legs in a powerful swiping motion.

She blocked that strike easily, pressing the tip of her own staff against the ground to give her more than enough leverage to sustain a hit five times as strong. Instead of reversing the direction of his
spear, however, Marco simply let it slide over Jackie’s block, as he followed his own momentum into a raised frontal kick to the face, crossing the trapped staffs. It was a risky move, but one that could pay off, if his opponent wasn’t expecting him to use his legs like that.

Jackie ducked away in the last minute, disengaging and resetting her guard in a swift martial motion.

Crap!

Well, he had played his card. Now the cat was out of the bag. She would be paying extra attention to his feet. In fact, she had probably already been expecting something like this, given how fast she had reacted. Jackie fought like a swordsman, even without a sword, and Marco fought like a martial artist, no matter what you put in his hands. They both knew the other too well to be caught by surprise.

Jackie tested his guard again, with a series of quick swings and thrusts. Marco counter-attacked, and met her well-coordinated defense once again. They circled each other, hitting harder and faster, mixing kicks on his end and fluid feints on hers. The audience cheered.

They weren’t holding back. At least Marco wasn’t. He knew that, even if he injured Jackie, Orel was right there beside them, attentively watching the bout, ready to heal any wound.

Their fight turned into a fierce yet elegant dance. The sound of wooden staffs striking each other soon became the rhythm at which their steps moved, their bodies turning along a central axis like a rotating waltz as they each looked for openings that were never really there. Feints on top of feints. Sweat glistened along Marco’s arms and shirtless torso, while Jackie’s hair became a savage mess over her head. The crowds shouted wildly, but Marco barely heard them now. He doubted Jackie felt any different. Even Orel had long faded into the background. It was just the two of them.

Her grin was that of a hungry lioness, and Marco was sure a similar expression of fierce delight must have reflected in his eyes. It might be that other Marco, Marco of Zonst, filtering through from the dreams into his conscious mind, or maybe it was the same young Marco from back in Echo Creek who trained karate as a hobby all by himself, without needing any instruction. However it might be, he realized that, when his life was not at stake and his friends weren’t trying to kill him, he rather enjoyed a well-matched fight. In love, and in battle, Jackie’s dexterous body was a fantastic counterpart to his own.

_Crash_!

His most powerful swing yet. Blocked.

_Swish_!

Jackie’s jab at his chest. Or rather, where his chest would have been, if Marco had been an idiot.

_Ky-yah_!

A rolling kick, deftly avoided.

_Slap_!

Jackie’s staff, striking hard against Marco’s leg, the only one still in contact with the floor.

_Thud_!
...as the cavern rolled around him and his head met the stone floor. He had barely noticed the instant it all was over.

Marco tried lifting his staff to defend himself, even while prone, but Jackie’s boot had planted itself on the spear shaft, rendering it immobile. Her own weapon was now pointed straight at Marco’s throat, preempting him from rolling out of the way.

“Do… aah… you… aah… yield, Marco?” she asked, panting but triumphant.

“Y… yes.” He smiled. “Yes, knight captain,” he corrected himself, smirking.

The cheering crowd probably didn’t see Jackie roll her eyes.

----

“Do you yield, Jackie?” Marco asked with a chuckle, as he held her arm behind her body and pressed her down against the pelt covering the center of the room’s floor.

“Never!” she exclaimed, exaggeratedly. She struggled to get free, just for the fun of it.

Jackie knew she couldn’t best Marco in hand-to-hand combat, and she knew the boy didn’t truly resent her for her rather hard-fought victory earlier that day. So, when Marco had suggested a ‘rematch’, she had known what was up. Particularly given that they had been already naked when the topic finally came up.

“Well, then I suppose I just will have to make you yield,” Marco whispered into her ear from behind, pressing her down, in that deep steamy voice of his. Jackie bit her lip in anticipation.

Marco was right to say he had changed from his old self back in Echo Creek, more than he perhaps realized. He was still very much that sweet boy, but there was an edge to this version of Marco, one which Jackie had to admit meshed surprisingly well with the more thorny aspects of who she herself had become.

“No,” Jackie answered, still defiant.

She didn’t have the sword right now. She didn’t have the air raiders watching her now. She didn’t have to be invincible. She didn’t want to be invincible. She wanted Marco to win, to win over her, and to let herself lose, for once. But she didn’t want to make it quite that easy either. Where was the fun in that?

She felt the impact of a powerful palm, right on her left asscheek, hard enough to leave a temporary mark. She yelped in surprise.

“Um, Jackie, is it…” Marco began to ask, concerned that he might have gone too far.

He hadn’t. Not nearly far enough, actually. But, in the end, he was still the caring boy she remembered, and that was precisely why she trusted him to do this.

“Yeah, it is,” she shut him up. “Keep going. I’ll tell you if I need you to stop…”

Slap! Harder than before. Marco hadn’t needed to be told twice. Good.

“No,” Jackie answered, still defiant.
Slap! Slap! Slap!

She yelped. The sensation was genuinely painful, and yet, at the same time, she could feel the knots in her shoulders unraveling, as if the impact waves from his palm on her buttocks turned from hurt to relief as they traveled up her spine. She could feel herself letting go. She didn’t often have a chance to let go.

“Do you yield!?” he demanded.

Jackie bit her lips. “No. And… Marco, pinch my breasts.”

It was a delicate balance, between breaking the scene and telling her boyfriend what she wanted, but it was something Jackie had learned before, to surrender control while asking for what she craved. Adalheidis had taught her that. Of course, back then, Jackie had been in the opposite role.

She felt a pair of calloused fingers take hold of her sensitive nipple, while her hand remained held behind her back. A small twisting motion, painful and pleasurable all at once. It made her feel lightheaded. It was like eating spice-spiders: not something she would have wanted in every meal by any means, but sometimes, it just hit the spot. Sometimes, she liked it rough.

Orel would never do this for her. It just wasn’t in his nature. Jackie was surprised to discover that it was in Marco’s, after all. She would have never had guessed it, thirteen years ago.

He twisted her other nipple. She let out a satisfied cry, and felt her eyes starting to tear up slightly. Marco let go of her breasts.

Slap! Slap! Slap!

Her ass felt sore. Jackie purred.

“Do you yield?”

“No.”

Slap! Slap! Slap!

“Is Kar watching?” Jackie asked, between yelps of pain and delight.

Marco was silent for a second. “He is… aware,” he admitted, a bit concerned.

“Good,” Jackie remarked, simply.

“Do you like to be watched?” Marco asked, in a surprised impish tone, just as he dipped two fingers lightly inside her already wet folds from behind.

Jackie nodded and moaned her assent.

She felt something wet and slimy wrap around her captive arm, as Marco’s right hand twisted into the coiling tentacle.

“What? You want an audience, kid?” came a sardonic voice behind her. “Won’t your other boyfriend be mad about this?”

“Well, aren’t you… ah... watching anyways?” she asked. Marco’s other hand was still massing her sex. God, Kar was hearing her moan! “Just… aaah… keep watching. Nothing… else. If that… aaah! … works… for you.”
“Heh. No skin of my back,” he replied. “See, Marco, I told you she was a freak!”

Freak? Perhaps, but a freak in her own terms. Not on Sam’s and not on those of Star’s dumb wish either. She could still decide the things she wanted to do, on her own, and right now what she wanted was…

Marco’s fingers slid up through her stomach, leaving a wet trail of her own fluids, before pinching hard at her left breast. She shuddered, as Kar’s body kept her pressed against the ground.

Jackie took a second or so to catch her breath, then she began wiggling her thoroughly smacked rear at the boy behind her. Enough of preliminaries! She pressed herself against his crotch, making quite clear what she wanted.

Slap!

Uh? Marco’s hand had retreated from her chest, smacking her hard in the ass instead.

“So, Jackie, do you yield?” he asked. The tip of his cock suddenly pressing in, hard and thick against her opening.

“No,” she responded.

Slap!!

The hardest hit yet, just as the shaft retreated away from her, leaving her panting and empty all at once. Jackie yelped. No, she mewled. Kar chuckled at her.

Damn, Marco was playing dirty! And she appreciated him all the more for it...

“Do you yield?”

That was the whole point, after all. To surrender. To let him claim her.

“No.”

Slap!

This was her chance. The only time she could do it. The only time the knight captain could let herself be defeated, and have it still be ok.

“Do you yield?” Marco asked again.

“Yes,” Jackie answered. “Yes… please.”

She felt Marco enter her, slowly at first. She felt Kar tense once again, keeping her held in place. She felt Marco’s fingers reach around to massage the front of her sex, as his cock glided in and out of her. Long calm thrusts gave way to a fast and rhythmic pounding motion soon enough. Jackie panted and moaned under her lover’s almost frantic exertions.

Every so often, however, just as she was about ready to come, Marco would remove his fingers from her clit, bring his free hand around, and deliver yet another smack to her ass. It was torture, of the most tantalizing kind. He edged her like that for what seemed like forever, and Jackie let herself dissolve into the mixed sensations. She let herself go entirely, if only so very briefly. Tears of pain and joy flowing free from a face that was no longer any sort of mask.

She wasn’t even listening to whatever sardonic comments Kar had to contribute to the situation,
and she didn’t care. But she wanted him there anyways, for some reason, watching. A witness to the fact that she was still human, underneath it all.

Eventually, Marco pulled out, spraying her back with his orgasm, as he drove her own climax to completion with his fingers. Kar let go, and then faded away. The boy hugged Jackie, cradling her. Utterly sore, utterly exhausted, and utterly satisfied, she fell asleep within his powerful arms.

It felt good to let go.

----

“Do we have a full report?” Jackie asked, donning on her full knight captain persona, even in her own room, even alone with the two people who knew everything about her, who had seen her at her most vulnerable. Well, three, perhaps, if you counted Kar’Margorach.

“Yes, knight captain. Scouts say that both entry points are… clear,” Orel explained.

He glanced, uneasily, at Marco.

Jackie instantly got the chilling implication behind the anodyne term. It wasn’t in any way surprising, not for anyone who had dealt with Midnight’s forces before. The mage was probably just trying to avoid upsetting the relative newcomer. Not that he succeeded, however, going by the other boy’s expression.

“What does ‘clear’ mean here, exactly?” Marco asked, suspicious. “No sign of Silence and her spells or…?”

They had dispatched a squadron each to look back into Sailor’s Ridge, as well as the abbey in which Marco had been held prisoner. The plan was to scout the known entryways: the Aestus Memoria, and Midnight’s shrine. Clearly, Star, or Midnight, or whoever she was, hadn’t imagined that they would go back there. Based on Orel’s report, both passageways were, as far as they could tell, unguarded.

Unfortunately, that was only half the meaning behind describing those areas as clear.

“I am sorry, Marco,” Orel eased in the news. “Please understand that this has nothing to do with you, and everything to do with the evil which has taken over this world. There is no one left near either entrance… hostile or otherwise.”

Marco sighed, heavily. For a moment, Jackie was worried he was about to collapse, to yell, or to punch the stone walls. Despite Orel’s words, Jackie knew Marco would blame himself. She knew that, because she continued to blame herself, no matter what the mage said, this time or any other. Orel, in a way that was entirely reasonable, but altogether less human, always would put the blame square on the shoulders of Midnight, and on no one else’s.

Jackie couldn’t do that. She kept wondering if there was something they could have done to prevent it. They had saved Marco, after all. Surely they could have rescued a few others, if they had really tried. Then again, even if they had had the time to choose, how could they? How could they pick, among hundreds of villagers, the dozen or so they might have been able to carry in griffon flight? Plus, it would have meant putting the air raiders themselves at even greater risk. It would have meant ordering her soldiers to risk their lives further, to no significant (and possibly negative) effect on the overall war effort.

Um. As if there was any significant positive effect to be had in this war… no, Jackie couldn’t think like that!
“Another town burned to the ground, on the caprices of the almighty evil goddess of this world, then?” she asked, letting her frustration, but not her guilt, tinge her words.

She couldn’t bring herself to name the person responsible, to say it had been Star. They all danced around that question these days. That was the whole point. The reason they had been scouting the entrances. The distance in time since Midnight had first appeared in this world and when Star had crossed the portal had given Marco and her some hope. There was now some inkling of a chance that they weren’t the same person, that the murderous deity wasn’t really Star. And yet…

“Evil and almighty are a contradiction of terms,” mused Orel. “We shouldn’t underestimate Midnight, but calling her all-powerful is giving her far too much credit.”

“A contradiction?” Marco asked, before Jackie could do the same. She knew Midnight was not actually almighty, of course, but she couldn’t help but wonder about the mage’s cryptic first statement.

“An omnipotent God, if one exists at all, has no wants, no unfulfilled desires, nothing to strive for, and thus, nothing to fight for. They would be benevolent by definition, indifferent at worst. Selfish desire is needed for evil to exist, and one who is all-powerful has nothing to desire,” Orel explained.

“Mortals, and the lower potencies of the multiverse, all have wants, and have desires, and thus the potential for evil, and for a certain kind of good, an active drive to do good let’s call it, which the almighty would also lack.” Orel’s eyes seemed to stare into the distance as he spoke, even though there was nothing farther away there than the wall of the cavern. “It is an error to presume that a God, fully unopposed, would interact with the world like we do, if only perhaps at a grander scale. Instead they would just will the world to be as it is and become what it will infallibly become, because all would be as they will it from the start, with no other option ever existing. Fighting an almighty God is impossible. Not just winning such fight, mind you. The mere idea of that struggle is itself logically unsustainable.”

Jackie hadn’t thought of it that way before.

“So,” Marco asked. “Are we really fighting Midnight, though? Because, from where I am standing, we are not exactly doing much to her. She might not be almighty, but she is mighty enough...”

“On the contrary,” Orel replied. “That’s the problem: she isn’t mighty enough. There is a... story I heard once about this,” he added. “Do you know what makes the devil so terrifying? What drives Lucifer to a madness that no other angel knows?”

Jackie and Marco both shook their heads.

“Some would say his failing was a lack of moral compass, and take comfort in this,” he offered. “Unfortunately, I don't believe that is true. In the end, it all comes down to power, to having so much of it, and yet not quite enough. When it comes to mortals and to the lesser angels, their power, their will, is restrained by the opposition of many other forces. Not so the Morning Star. He has power uncontested, knowledge unrivaled, and yet the universe never fully bends to his will. That is his real tragedy.”

That sounded somewhat like Sam, actually, who, despite all his power, considered his own existence a fixed part on someone else’s play. Even if that particular devil insisted he wasn’t the original one, he fit the mold of Orel’s tale: unimaginable might and yet nowhere near satisfied with it. Jackie supposed, though, that it would also apply to Midnight as well. Even more so, in fact. That was, of course, Orel’s point.
Sam’s reaction to his few limitations was to declare the entire multiverse pointless and absurd. He had gone well beyond struggling against fate, all the way to cynical despondence. But Star? Star was full of rage and defiance even back before she had set herself up as an evil goddess.

“There are always things he can't quite do, important things, things that must be done, things worth stretching his mighty wings and taking flight in search of, things worth fighting for. So he fights, he struggles, he goes mad with desperation, and the world trembles underneath,” Orel described. “It occurs to me, that Midnight is like that as well: unrivaled in this, her domain, yet unable to do fulfill her true desires within it.”

To revive Moon. To make Marco and Jackie love her. At least, if she was indeed Star.

Jackie wasn’t sure she understood that sentiment entirely, but perhaps that was the point. She didn’t have the kind of power Star had. So, while she knew the frustration of not being able to do many things - protect the people of Sailor's Ridge, for example - she had never experienced being able to do everything but the things that mattered to her. Was that really enough to drive anyone into such extremes of madness?

“With all due respect,” Kar’s voice broke the quietness that had fallen over the room. “That’s all a load of crap! You don’t just do evil because you can do evil, or because you can’t get the things you want. You do evil because you fucking well choose to do evil! Because, ultimately, you decided you don’t care about anyone but yourself!”

“Speaking from experience, I presume,” Orel retorted, angrily. “Can someone explain to me why that fell creature needs to be around during our planning?”

“I dunno, how about... to check your bullshit?” Kar offered. “And, yeah, it is from fucking experience. At least I chose to not be a scumbag, while apparently you just confessed you’d be a monster if you could just get away with it!”

“I said no such thing!” the mage protested. “I am just pointing out there is a risk inherent in the kind of reality-warping amounts of power someone like Midnight wields. It’s not just about being stronger than anyone else around. It redefines your morality! But I am sure the point is lost on a third-rate copy of a low-grade demonspawn like…”

“Stop!” Jackie shouted at the two of them, breaking up the imminent fight. “Please, stop… look, it doesn’t matter, alright? If Midnight is Star, and she really just went mad with power, then we still need to figure out how it happened. A timeline, at the very least. If Midnight is not Star, then I am not sure we care about their motives, but there might still be some useful information in there nonetheless. So, well, back to the original plan…”

“Right,” Marco took it from there. Fortunately, it seemed he had found some way to calm down Kar, who had gone conspicuously silent. “So, just to recap, we think that the tunnels connecting the abbey to the… Aestus Memoria, was it? …we think those predate the current state of the world and anything in the priesthood books, right? I mean, the structures we saw down there seem more technologically advanced than anything you guys have found in the surface. Correct? So, something happened between when those were built and when history began to be recorded again in this dimension…”

Jackie nodded. “Plus, you said that there was that huge spell down there. ‘Horrific Hellspawn Swarm’ or whatever? It seems pretty obvious to me that they are guarding something. If not knowledge, then maybe still some sort of weapon we can use, a vulnerability we can exploit… anything…”
It wasn’t really a great plan, but it was still the best they had now. It was perhaps the best they had had in over a decade. It would have to do.

“Yeah, I suppose so, but…” Marco protested. “Well, Jackie, that’s also a problem. You weren’t there, you didn’t hear them. The swarm is not like the iron war unicorns or the land narwhals, they are something way worse. It doesn’t matter if the entrances are clear. That thing is still down there. The only reason Kar and I got through is that it didn’t know how to keep me down there without killing me.” He sighed. “I am not sure what it will do if we end up interfering with their actual goal, whatever it is, rather than just passing by…”

“That creature, that spell… it presents itself as a host of demons, correct? Like the thing infesting your arm, only larger and more numerous?” Orel asked. Marco nodded in response. “I believe I could be of assistance there. In fact, I’d consider it an honor to dispel their foulness from this dimension…”

“Of course you would,” Kar interjected.

Marco glared at his own right hand, staring it down for a few seconds, in apparent silence.

“…and if I can’t,” Orel continued, ignoring the monster arm’s comment. Jackie had given him a direct order to stop arguing with it, after all, “then I should at least be able to keep them occupied while you scout the underground.”

Jackie put a hand on the lieutenant’s shoulder, asking with her eyes if he was sure about that. He nodded.

“Well,” she added. “We’ll have supplies this time around. Food, and torches, and weapons. We can move fifty or so air raiders back through the sea, plus the equipment, as long as we don’t mind all mounts going way over combat load for that one trip. If we can’t crack it now, I don’t think we ever will.”

“Tomorrow, then?” Marco asked, uncertain.

Kar seemed to have vanished once again, retreating into the boy’s arm. Apparently, he, or Marco, had decided that this meeting would go better with him listening in invisible silence for the rest of it. For what it’s worth, they were probably right. Not that there was much meeting left anyways.

“Yeah, tomorrow,” Jackie mused. Then, she grinned at the two of them. “Tomorrow we fly once again!”

“Yes, my knight captain,” Orel vowed solemnly.

“You know, guys,” Marco pointed out. “It’s just the three of us here. It’s fine to admit that we are scared, I think...?”

Not quite. Not for her, it wasn’t. Not until…

Jackie walked to the niche by the wall and gently placed the nacre scabbard back on its stand.

“Fine, Marco,” she admitted. “I am scared. The air raiders don’t exactly have a broad set of maneuvers for underground combat, and there is a pretty big chance we are taking everyone into a death trap down there.” It really was their most risky mission yet, and how often did they come out unscathed from even the ‘easy’ ones? “But, well, on the other hand, this is the first time in a long while that I feel this hopeful about the potential outcome of a mission.”
The first time in a decade that there was something to which to look forward in case of a success. Usually, they were just trying to avoid the consequences of an outright failure. The aim was simply to stay alive, and to keep others alive for a while longer. This time? This time there was the possibility of something that could actually be called a victory.

“If we can find out how Star became Midnight, or figure out that Star isn’t Midnight, that could truly make a difference,” she explained.

The answer could be down there: a solid lead on the origins of Midnight, and perhaps, just perhaps, a lead on how to stop her. Plus, a hope, however faint, that Star might not be beyond salvation.

“I just want to know that, well, that… that…” her voice cracked. It didn’t matter, she had put the sword away. Jackie could crack now, if only for a little while. “I want to know whether or not I have to learn how to fully hate her… for all of this…”

Marco walked up to her and put a firm powerful hand on her shoulder. It felt familiar, reassuring.

“I know I can’t even begin to understand what the last thirteen years must have been like for you, Jackie…” He paused, letting the acknowledgement linger heavily over the silence that followed. “But, if there is any chance that Star can be saved, that she isn’t Midnight or can be made to stop being Midnight, then, well, we owe it to her to try. Don’t we?”

Did they? Jackie flinched. She retreated ever so slightly away from him.

She genuinely didn’t know if that was true anymore. If Star wasn’t Midnight, and yet she was somehow alive, then of course Marco was right. But if Star had been the one to kill Gwen, the one to kill Adalheidis, or Ythul, or… so many others… then what right had Jackie to offer forgiveness on their behalf?

“Let’s learn the truth,” she offered. It was all she could really promise.

Yet, deep in her heart, Jackie wished for nothing more than for Star to be proven innocent. For Midnight to be something else, anything else, anything other than their teenage love. And for the mewman princess to yet be alive, somehow; alive and the same as they both remembered her.

‘Behold the force of evil incarnate, borne of deepest heart’s desire.’

Jackie remembered the words, and shuddered. Not only because Star becoming evil had been foretold to them, thirteen years ago. But also because that hope, her wish for Star’s innocence, was also part of Jackie’s own deepest heart desire. There were hopes that weren’t meant to be held onto for so long, hopes that risked sinking you into madness if you couldn’t let them go...

“Jackie, are you alright?” asked a worried Marco, taking her out of her introspection.

She shook her head.

Marco hugged her, holding on tight.

Jackie smiled, “No, but I think… I think I’ll be.”

Come tomorrow she would be ready. Come tomorrow she would be the knight captain, valiant and unbreakable. Come tomorrow she would wield the glass sword, invincible. But tonight, tonight she could shatter, if only for a moment, inside Marco’s arms.

“Well, I should take my leave,” offered Orel, at just that very moment. He smiled at the other two,
and bowed, unfailingly polite.

Jackie hesitated. She didn’t mind. She really didn’t mind how things had been so far: taking turns, having Marco or Orel step out at strategic moments. These days, she had, often enough, cuddled to sleep with both her boyfriends. Yet, when it came the time for anything else, one of the two was always conspicuously absent, allowing her time alone with the other.

She really didn’t mind that. But, tonight, the day before they rode back towards Sailor’s Ridge, before they all headed deep into the foundations of the world…

Marco seemed to sense her hesitation. He turned around, towards Orel.

“Hey, man, you don’t have to go. Look, I get it if you don’t want to, but… but as for me… I mean, well... I’d offer to leave instead, but I think... I think Jackie would appreciate us both sticking around this time…” His serious demeanor gave way to a bashful smile then. “Besides, it is probably the only fair way, really.”

“Tomorrow we fly, and tonight might be the last night, for any of us,” Orel remarked. “The only fair way, then, to ensure our knight captain doesn’t regret the one who left, or resent the one who stayed,” he concluded.

Morbid as usual, but Jackie would have been lying if she said her own thoughts were not along the same terrifying lines.

“My knight captain, I’d be glad to stay,” Orel declared. “And Marco, you are a kind person, I gratefully accept the offer to join the two of you. I hope my presence shall not be too cumbros for yourself.”

“Dude, just drop the formal tone, please,” Marco begged. “It makes it weird.”

‘Cumbros, too!’ Jackie thought with a chuckle.

“Understood,” replied Orel, predictably.

Jackie, deciding to move things along before this all became a debate on Orel’s strange sense of etiquette, pushed herself forward, and planted a firm kiss on Marco’s lips. It was a loving kiss, yes, but also a deeply passionate one. Their tongues sparred against one another, with all the intensity of combat, yet their bodies pressed against each other in a soothing flowing embrace.

The idea of Orel watching that excited Jackie. The mage had seen her kiss Marco, and Marco had certainly seen the reverse, but this was a different kiss than those shared in public, one that was more hunger than it was care or longing.

She pressed her fingers along Marco’s naked torso, the one he often kept on display between the open sides of his newly sewn leather jacket. Orel had seen her caress another, many times before - Gwen, Adal, Kara - but, somehow, the novelty of it being another man, and Marco in particular, aroused her.

Jackie turned around to look at her other lover. The mage smiled at her softly, lovingly. Not a shred of jealousy or envy in his eyes. He bore witness to her love for another, not with equanimity, but with sympathetic joy. She motioned for him to come closer, as she began relieving Marco of his jacket.

It was a jacket Gunvor the armorsmith had made for him, to replace the dusk priesthood robes they found him in. A replacement for another jacket, according to Marco, one he had the first time he
was in here. As armor went, it was nearly useless, but Jackie had surmised that the Earth boy enjoyed showing off his newly regained abs, particularly while not fighting. Not that she could blame him for it. Or complain!

In fact, Jackie took a few moments to appreciate the muscular torso of the awkward teen turned inter-dimensional warrior. She let her hands roam through the shapes. They were like those of a marble statue, yet softer and warmer, and infinitely more inviting. He kissed her, and she let herself melt into the kiss.

A third mouth kissed her neck, as she felt another, leaner, body embrace her from behind. As she pressed her breasts into the chest of the boy in front of her and slid her hands down to cup Marco’s magnificent ass, she felt a dexterous hand undo the belt of her pants. It slid into the front of them, and began gently massaging her sex. It started by applying pressure to the outside, then tracing the contour of her lower lips, as the ones upon her mouth locked into Marco’s.

Orel was masturbating her as she kissed the other man.

“Marco,” she moaned, coming out for air from the kiss for but a second.

Orel’s fingers dipped inside her at that prompt, slowly and nimbly circling her clit. He was only encouraged by her words, by her speaking another’s name.

There was something transgressive about the whole thing, for her if not for the unperturbed mage. She loved them both and desired them both, and yet there was something that pulled her closer and harder towards Marco, and rather than pull against it, Orel was pushing her towards her childhood love.

It was Orel who undid the laces of Jackie’s shirt, and pulled it over her shoulders. Orel who grabbed Marco’s hands and deposited them upon her breasts. Orel who, after doing that, went back to working on revving her up with his able fingers, as Marco groped and kissed her.

Was this how it had been before? Was that the role Jackie had played for Star and Marco?

No. It was different. Jackie certainly had enjoyed the idea of Star and Marco together, and the reality as well, but not at the expense of herself. Orel seemed almost to be effacing himself from the act, becoming a facilitator first and a partner second.

Jackie turned around, trying to kiss the mage, to pull him back into the action. He smiled and dodged her, giving her instead a peck on the cheek, just as he pulled down her pants and Marco began sucking her left breast, pinching the right nipple with his free hand.

She felt Marco’s erection through his own trousers, as she kicked hers away. Orel’s hands were on her back, giving her a brief massage. They held like this for a while. One boy sucking her nipples, the other unknotting her back, and Jackie felt herself break. Not like shattered glass, but like thread unraveling.

Orel was the one to carry her into bed. Marco the one to kiss her as her head touched the pillow. Both of their hands and tongues roamed her body then, and for a moment Orel was fully involved in the proceedings. But while the mage remained fully clothed, Marco had removed his pants.

The lieutenant’s tongue lapped at her cunt, incapable of moistening its folds any more than they were already, but doing its best in trying. It darted briefly on her clit, before making its way out and upwards. He kissed her waist, her navel, her breasts - where Marco’s tongue had also been a moment earlier - and finally, as his body turned to the side and his head slid just a smidge higher,
kissed her in the lips.

Just as he did, Marco’s cock lined up with the entrance of Jackie’s sex, and as Orel’s lips pressed softly against her own, her other boyfriend penetrated her.

Jackie felt the vague sensation that she was being bad, in a really really good way.

Nothing was wrong with that picture, of course. Marco was having fun, thrusting into her with the abandon of a wild stallion and yet not a smidge faster (nor slower!) than she wished him to go. Orel, fully dressed, holding her hand, kissing her neck, was clearly having fun as well.

Jackie definitely was having fun!

If it had been Marco in the middle, and her and Star doing this for him, Jackie would have been on board. If it had been Orel and Gwen, in either role, she likewise would have obliged. But there was something different, when it was all about her.

It was right, of course, but it felt wrong. Deliciously wrong.

Jackie moaned, and Orel gently turned her head to face him, smiled, then pointed her back towards Marco’s loving, and lusting, eyes.

She had been thinking about Star, and about Gwen, in the same thought, and it hadn’t been about death. Jackie wasn’t sure whether to feel guilty about it, or relieved. She let herself, not shatter, but dissolve. Dissolve into the physical pleasure of the fierce warrior plowing into her, and the strange game that her lover of well over a decade had devised for her.

Marco kissed her, passionately.

Orel held her hand tight.

Jackie came, with the force of steel melting in the heat of fire.

She felt Marco thrust into her, deeply, one final time, and then quickly pull out, finishing all over her legs. That... was already more risk than they should be taking, but it’s not like this dimension had heard of condoms.

She panted, as the two boys cuddled around her on opposite sides. She kissed Marco, and Orel as well. All three of them were smiling. Two of them were exhausted.

Still, slowly, Jackie felt her strength return. Because that was the thing about melted steel: you broke it down, you liquefied it, but only because you were about to forge it into something better. The knight captain of the air raiders felt stronger than ever, and she had the two boys to thank for it.

“Orel, drop your pants!” she commanded, finally. “We are certainly not done here.”

“My knight captain, that’s not really necessary.” The mage waved a hand dismissively. “I am quite satisfied as things are...”

“Well, I am not,” said Jackie. She meant it. Not physically, of course. She was plenty satisfied in that way! But she was not going to let Orel remain smug and dressed and acting all selfless on their last night before a mission. Not if she could help it!

She rolled herself around and undid the mage’s belt, pulling the man’s erection free from under the
cotton fabric below.

“Ah, my knight captain, are you sure?” Orel asked. “I do not wish for things to be cumb… awkward for… well…”

“Man, knock yourselves out,” Marco replied, turning around to regard the other two with a satisfied grin in his handsome face. “After what just happened, there is no way I would mind it. Besides, wasn’t tonight supposed to be fair?”

“Yeah,” Jackie recalled. Then, licking her lips, she gave Orel her best impish look. “And someone here is really not being fair, dude.”

She kissed the tip of the mage’s cock, circled her tongue around it like it was a lollipop. More for the visual effect than anything else. Once again, the fact that Marco was watching, and smiling at her to continue, only made it hotter for Jackie herself.

Eventually, she began taking Orel’s length into her mouth, using her tongue to massage it. She took untold pleasure as the man’s usually composed demeanor began relaxing into, at first, panting gasps, and, eventually, throaty moans of pleasure.

“So, Orel, what do you like the most about Jackie?” Marco asked calmly, almost innocently.

It took Jackie a moment to realize what he was doing, or how in sync Marco really was with her own thoughts.

“I… um… aaah… the knight captain is one of the bravest and… aaah… and smartest and … oooh!…” he trailed off.

As he spoke, Jackie stepped up her game, relaxing it when he once again went quiet.

“I mean,” Marco added, looking intently at the mage’s flustered face, “that’s of course all true, but, well, isn’t she also fucking hot, man?”

Jackie blushed slightly too. But, mostly, she just picked up pace in anticipation of Orel’s attempt at a response.

“Of… aaah… course… Jackie is beautiful… aaah!… alluring… aaaaah!…”

“How about her breasts?” the other boy prompted.

“L… lovely… aaah… of course… ce-celestial orbs of…”

Jackie reached under and around Orel with her hand, and began playing with her finger between the mage’s butt cheeks, gently massaging the opening.

“Her ass?” Marco insisted.

“She is… aaah!… callipygian…”

Jackie wiggled her ass at that last remark.

“And her lips, man?” Marco asked.

She increased the tempo of her head and tongue, and slowly began massaging from the other end.

“They are… they aaaaah… they are aaaaahhh…”
Jackie went all out!

“So, do you want to come inside them?” Marco asked, not changing his tone at all from his previous questions.

“Fuck yes!” Orel cried, as he, well, fucking did.

Jackie would have rolled over laughing at hearing the overly formal lieutenant of the air raiders speak like that. She would, that is, if her mouth weren’t otherwise occupied gulping down a hot load of cum. Well, it was worth it, and then some!

“Marco,” Orel spoke, once he recovered his breath. “You are a kind man, but you play quite dirty. As do you, my knigh… my love.”

Jackie grinned at that, blush and all.

“Hey! Look who's talking!” retorted Marco, chuckling. “You are the one who wanted to come off all selfless and composed back there! No way, if we are all doing this, then we are all doing this!”

He pressed his hand on the other man’s curls and messed them up, grinning, possibly making a point about him still being too composed for his taste. Then, hesitant, Marco retreated his hand from Orel’s hair, as if he had just realized that that, of all things, was going too far. Orel simply shrugged.

“You two are both terrible,” remarked Jackie, with the broadest smile she had had in years.

“True,” Marco said, suddenly back to his more confident self. “But you love us all the same.”

“Heh, yeah, you bet I do, dude,” Jackie agreed. “Eh… dudes.”

They all drifted into sleep not long after. For once, despite the dark tunnels and swarms of horrors that the future was bound to hold, despite all that she had been thinking about before, Jackie’s rest came quick and sound.

----

The sound of the alarm horn woke the knight captain up. She sprang up to her feet immediately.

For a second, Jackie thought it was another of her nightmares. She looked around for Gwendolyn, or Adalheidis, or anyone else she had already lost. It was only an instant later, when she saw the naked bodies of Marco and Orel besides her own, that she truly panicked. They were alive, after all. Both of them were still alive, out in the real world, which meant...

This was not a nightmare. And it was not a drill.

“Orel, up! And wake up Marco as well!” she yelled at her lover, as she raced to put on her leather armor.

“Y… yes, knight captain!” she heard him answer. He wasn’t confused, he wasn’t panicked, he wasn’t any more asleep than she was by now. He was a good soldier.

The knight captain steeled herself as fast as she could, centered her mind on the task at hand, pushed the fear and the confusion to the deepest depths of her mind. It took less than a second. But only then did she dare grab the blade. Sam’s sword.

The cries outside had barely started by the time Jackie Lynn Thomas had rushed out and jumped
into Pearl’s saddle. On the ground: soldiers were running around, grabbing their weapons, racing towards their mounts. On the air: two air raiders, the two on guard rotation, were already up, ready to present a first line of defense against… Oh, god!

There were so many! Undead iron flying warunicorns. Midnight’s shadows. Dozens of them, and that was just the beginning. A veritable army was pouring in through the cavernous entryway. And behind them a flying monster of fire and smoke. A dragon made of burning darkness, like the exhaust of a volcano. It vomited flame towards the stables below, towards the griffons still tied up to their poles…

It hit the edge of her sword!

Jackie had reached it in time, she was able to block the flames. They parted around the glass blade, diverted harmlessly into the rock floor of the cave. Bolts and javelins flew from the ground below and behind her, providing her some cover against the beasts above.

A full wing of griffon’s took flight besides her, just as the two riders ahead of her were picked apart by the murder of flying horses. They had been on guard rotation, they had done their duty, they had bought the rest of them some time, at a terrible cost. Two more corpses weighting on the knight captain’s conscience, and almost certainly not the last ones today.

The smoke. The bifurcated stream of fire hitting the ground below. The projectiles, friendly as well as hostile, that she and Pearl did their best to avoid. It was chaos. She couldn’t be everywhere. She couldn’t save everyone. Instead, Jackie focused on the dragon. It was the meanest ugliest thing in the sky so far, and crossbow bolts seemed to pass through it as through a ghost. She imagined javelins and flechettes wouldn’t fare any better. But Sam’s sword just might do the trick. It was the obvious target for her to engage.

The crystal blade cut through the plume of smoke that was the dragon’s neck, and the beast faded out with a thunder-like explosion. Sometimes, she hated the devil’s gift with all her soul, but other’s, like right now, she was forever grateful for the cursed weapon.

Invincible as long as she had the will to wield it. Invincible as long as she never faltered.

Two more of the shadow dragons followed behind the first, flowing like smoke through the entryway. Behind them, even more of the spike-covered undead flying horses followed. She had seen them before. The dragons, that is. They were also Star’s spells. She had used them against Sam, in their terrifying second battle.

Holy fucking crap!

Flechettes fell like an iron hail near the cave mouth, as the single airborne squadron tried to hold the line at the constricted opening. It was their best chance of keeping such a large force away. Jackie flew to cover them, dispatching two of the monstrous warunicorns on her way.

The glass blade was invincible. But she couldn’t be everywhere.

Two dragons landed upon the stables below. One vomited flame upon their water supplies, covering the area with a cloud of smoke. Jackie heard the cry of griffons, and the sound of flesh being torn apart. She focused on the task at hand, to hold the entryway, to keep the bulk of Midnight’s forces at bay.

How? Why now?
A ray of bright golden fire sprouted from Orel’s hand. It hit the shadow dragon straight in its chest, burning through it like flame to paper. The mage casted another bolt, then another, and another still. His face was one of deep calm focus. He would destroy the dark beast if it took a hundred strikes to do so.

---

Meanwhile, Kar and Marco were already refocusing the exorcism ritual in holding the second incorporeal monster. It was a spell, but it was insubstantial enough that it might as well have been a spirit, like the green flame form changing ghosts of Wish had been. The ritual affected the dragon well enough. Besides, he only had to hold him for a few seconds, while Orel dispatched the other one.

---

A second squadron flew up behind the first, passing Jackie and joining the bombardment at the entrance. She wasn’t sure how, but they must have had recovered control of the stables. With the added support, they were holding the line, for now. But it was a matter of time before they became overwhelmed. The flechettes were running out, without time for even a round trip to the armory, and spears and bolts were only somewhat effective against the heavily armored horses.

It was a massacre up in the air, and not entirely against them. Midnight’s forces didn’t seem to care for their lives. And why would they? She probably could cast a hundred warnicorns into existence but with a flick of her wand. They threw themselves to their deaths at the cavern entrance. Not counting her own kills, Jackie’s troops were downing more undead horses per friendly casualty than they had ever before managed in their entire history. Yet the attacking spell hordes felt endless, and the air raiders were very much finite.

So, why now? Why in here? If Midnight could always overwhelm them, if she knew where to find them, if she could make this kind of hell rain upon them… why today?

A fourth dragon. Jackie and Pearl flew to intercept it.

Parry the flames, cut its throat, the dragon falls, yet it’s no use.

Jackie and the remains of those two squadrons fell back. The line had been breached. Endless hordes of warnicorns up in the air inside the cavern, breathing fire at everything that wasn’t iron or stone, goring the griffon-less soldiers on the ground with their horns.

That cry! That had been Sigrun! Another. Gunvor?

The knight captain reminded herself that she could not afford to be scared, could not afford to be sad. Not with the crystal blade in her hands. Fury, however, was quite allowed!

---

“Now or never, kid,” yelled Kar, as three of the flying iron horses flew low right in front of him.

Marco didn’t need to be told twice. He was already moving his hands as fast as he could, performing the gestures of the fierceness ritual.

Orel was already up in the air, with the last of the air raiders who still had living mounts. Even so, there were four or five black dots in the sky for every single one of the half-feline half-bird creatures. The soldiers in the ground were not faring too much better. As many were running away from the landing warnicorns and their firebreath as those who still had managed to keep firing their
crossbows into the sky.

Marco felt the anger swell inside him. He felt his blood boil, his muscles tense with a pressure beyond imagining, his heart beat faster than any living thing could withstand.

He grabbed one of the iron projectiles in the canister beside him, and threw it at the landing beasts, breaking the spine of a warnicorn in half, right through its neck. Jackie was right, these things were remarkably effective, even without an explosive in them. Of course, flechettes were meant to be dropped from on high, not thrown like darts from below, but Marco had had to improvise. Besides, he now had the strength for it.

This was the natural environment for the fierceness ritual as well. This was the optimal exterior for the internal mindstate the magic provoked in Marco. The screams from the air raiders, he could easily deal with that, even though he didn’t want to enjoy those. The smell of burning flesh, who had him about to vomit just one second prior, now felt sweet and appetizing. But, lest anyone think that he didn’t still have his priorities straight, Marco’s favorite sound right now, was that of bone and iron bending and then breaking apart, warnicorn bones in particular. He threw a second flechette, and grinned maniacally as it hit its mark.

This was certainly better than throwing boulders at the beasts. More precise. More efficient. He could kill more and faster this way, and that filled his meteorically pumping heart with glee.

Eventually, the dumb beasts realized who the biggest threat around was, and four of them landed around Marco. Kar darted out, coiling around the neck of one of the creatures, breaking it with an ever so satisfying ‘crack’!

The spikes cut the demon’s arm skin, and blood sprayed around, pushed by a circulatory system working a hundred times faster than normal. Both Kar and Marco were too full of magically-charged adrenaline to pay much mind to that. The demon arm’s wounds quickly closed, as the spell-symbiote simply cauterized itself on the dead warnicorn’s fire.

The human threw another of the flechettes, point blank, smashing in the skull of the second warnicorn, then jumped away to avoid the fire breaths of the other two. So much for his weapons. The canisters, left behind in the interest of expediency, melted into an amorphous steel blob as the flames hit them.

Well, it mattered little. Kar launched itself at one of the remaining warnicorns, powered by muscles like engines of war, and…

The monster arm failed to reach its target.

Marco’s entire body seized up. He felt a sudden sharp pain on his chest, and his breath failed him. His mind became foggy, the entire situation around him suddenly didn’t make any sense. Why was he here? What was going on?

“Marco, I feel…” Kar stopped short as well.

Something sharp punctured Marco’s right shoulder. His blood sprouted like a geyser, partially relieving the unnatural pressure under which it was running inside his body, even now that his heart had staggered. Too much. Too fast.

“Marco, hold o…” was the last he heard before the world faded away. Orel’s voice.
No one around, no one still fighting, but her. Jackie couldn’t give up, and couldn’t be bested. The knight captain of the air raiders, if any still survived, fought on, holding together through sheer force of will. Her determination kept the unbreakable blade, well, unbreakable.

Sunbolt flew up to her. Orel was fine, he was alive! He was atop his usual mount, and he was yelling something at her, something like…

“Sheathe the blade, Jackie! Please!” he pleaded.

Jackie trusted Orel, nearly unconditionally. She put the blade back into the nacre scabbard. Just in time. She felt it rattle, fragile again against the metal, as her eyes noticed the unconscious body that Orel’s mount was carrying between rider and reins.

“He is alive. But we have to go now!” the mage added. “I am sorry, Jackie, no time to get anyone else. I’ve sounded the retreat, if there is anyone else to listen to it, they’ll… We must go!”

And Jackie would have been confused, she would have been sad or terrified, she would have yelled and said she couldn’t leave her men behind. But that wasn’t true, and she couldn’t afford the hesitation. She couldn’t afford to let the glass sword break by her side. She couldn’t afford to break down. Because if she did, or if they stayed, then all was lost for certain.

She turned around, and followed the fleeing Sunbolt.

Orel had lifted a radiant golden shield before them. It got them past the mouth of the cavern and out in the vertical plains of the canyon. The way up was crawling with the iron warnicorns.

Midnight’s shadows were fast, but there is no creature in the sky that can compare to a dragoncycle in flight. Jackie, in her current mental state, did not dare hold her blade. But she didn’t have to, all she needed was to tell Pearl where to go, and she would zoom past the undead unicorns, even against the pull of gravity. Orel, for his part, could defend himself, and Sunbolt was the fastest griffon that had ever flown with the air raiders.

That meant that they made it out. It also meant, in all likelihood, that they were the only ones who could.

There was nothing, in this world or any other, quite like the thrill of flying. But sometimes even that didn’t bring Jackie any joy. For what joy could be had when nearly everyone she had known in the last thirteen years laid dying behind her? People she led all the way to this grim end? People for which she had been responsible? People she had ought to protect?

All she could do, because she had to, because Sam’s blade demanded as much of her, was to stop herself from feeling despair.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, that happened! Goodbye our dear air raiders, we hardly knew ye…

Hope you enjoyed the middle parts of this chapter, because that’s probably about as happy as Part IV ever gets!

Oh, and btw, you might or might not believe me, but the Land Narwhals were on the draft of this chapter before I ever saw the Narwhale from 04x19a :D
Coming up next: Chapter 38: Bad Habits

;)}
Bad Habits

Chapter Summary

In which Marco remembers and forgets, Jackie finds purpose amidst loss, and Orel stands valiantly against the advancing darkness.

Chapter Notes

This chapter arguably marks the mid-point of Part IV, at least, in terms of the planned chapter count.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 38: Bad Habits

Jackie’s arm moved through the air like lightning, guiding the precise strikes of her invincible sword. The glass blade cut through stone less like a hot knife through butter and more like a diamond scalpel might cut styrofoam, minuscule particles of gravel crumbling out of thin but deep incisions. She made a vertical gash, then followed it with a shorter horizontal slash crossing through the first, two thirds up: a burial mark made in the cavern wall.

It was a cavern by a rocky shore, smaller and closer to the surface than the one in which they had all woken up that morning. On its wall, on the other side of the ocean, Jackie Lynn Thomas had made fifty-nine marks. One for each of the raiders who had lost their lives that morning.

“You know, my knight captain,” remarked Orel, gently, as he walked back from further inside the cave. “Leaving those will only make it easier for Midnight to know we were here.”

It didn’t matter. Star could probably track them down either way and, for that same reason, they would be airborne again in a couple more hours. One way or the other, they couldn’t afford to stay long in the same place. The cuts on the wall changed nothing about that basic fact.

“I want her to know,” declared Jackie. “If there is anything of her that is really Star, that is still Star… I want her to know what she’s done!”

A tear slid along the contours of the scar on her face, a face otherwise as hard as the rock in front of her. She didn’t turn back towards her lover. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed on the crosses. Behind each cross, she could see a face, and on every face a story: the story of a person she had let down, a person she had led to their death. It was fifty-nine stories that had ended this morning, fifty-nine hopes, unanswered.

She had wondered before if she could hate Star enough to do what was needed, if or when it came to that. Now, she had her answer.

“An Earth burial symbol,” Orel concluded, accurately.
“Yes,” Jackie confirmed. “A religious one. It represents death, resurrection, and, well, the sacrifice of the son of God on behalf of humanity, I guess. Not that I was ever…” she stopped herself.

Shouldn’t she be? After Tom? After Sam? Didn’t it make sense to believe in, well, in something?

Then again, just because there were devils and hell, it didn’t mean there were angels and heaven, or that it would look anything like what people back on Earth expected heaven to look like. After all, the demons she had met - Tom, for example - weren’t exactly what you’d call ‘by-the-book’ either. As for God…? Well, in this fucked up dimension, ‘God’ meant Midnight. Star.

The air raiders. Was there a heaven for them?

Would they go somewhere else? Somewhere better?

Or would they vanish into nothingness? Just spells in Midnight’s domain?

If they ever found Tom again, would he know the answer? Would she dare ask him?

According to Marco’s tale, Tom had been captured at best, killed at worst, by one of Midnight’s shadows. Could demons die? And if so, where did they go?

Her mother believed in reincarnation, sometimes. Maybe that’s what would happen to the air raiders? Would they be reborn? But rebirth in this dimension was not a happy prospect. So Jackie cut crosses, not wheels. She wanted them to go on, life after death, but in a gentler world than this one. Starting all over, back here… it wasn’t any better than hell. She knew that from experience.

“Look, it’s complicated,” she finally spoke to the man patiently waiting besides her. She found herself unable to muster the energy to put all those conflicting thoughts in order. If she did, the mage might have answers for her, and Jackie wasn’t sure she wanted to hear them.

“Yes, it is. You don’t need to explain,” Orel reassured her. “For what is worth, the symbol might be human, but the sentiment is… well, let’s just say the story is not unprecedented. Divine sacrifice, after all, is…”

“Orel,” Jackie interrupted him. “How can you be so calm? How can you stand it!? All of it!”

She felt the blade tremble in the faint breeze, and carefully sheathed it, to be safe.

If it weren’t for him, and for Marco, Jackie would have simply flown to the middle of the petrified forest, back to the place the portal had been at, and demanded that Midnight show herself before her. She would have struck Star down with the glass blade. Or, more likely, gotten herself killed or captured instead. Either way it wouldn’t matter. All those deaths were her fault! But, even more so than hers, they were Star’s fault!

"Jackie, your anger is justified. It's righteous, and it's part of what fuels your will to fight,” Orel replied to her question, his tone frustratingly serene. “But the light I wield... it cannot be fueled by rage. It comes from a different source, and it would only become poison if I were to wield it in fury. It doesn’t really matter how justified.” He paused, for an instant, and something seemed to sweep into his voice, something she hadn’t heard before. “Please... do not make me say... that I am angry, that I am... frustrated.”

Jackie turned around, and looked at the curly haired man, worry visible on his brow. She realized, for the first time in all these years, that the mage’s power might have had its own kind of strings attached.
In a way, it sounded like her own burden. Jackie couldn't let herself feel doubt, while Orel couldn't allow himself anger.

“How is Marco?” she asked, switching topics. “Has he woken up?”

“He sleeps still, but he will be fine,” Orel explained. “I healed the wound and got his heart beating again before we... before we left the canyon. I've been making good progress on most of the damage to the rest of his internal organs. Even the older harm. It will take a while longer, though, and we might have to move him a few times still before he bounces back, even with my help. He has really been playing with fire there. But this time he'll be fine, my knight captain.”

There was a brief pause after that, as Jackie reflected upon his words. Her eyes regarded the crosses once again. She stared in silence, for want of an apology she couldn’t give.

“Orel, there are no more air raiders than you and me now…” Jackie remarked, not even sure if she could count Marco as well, glad as she was to hear he was alive. “I am no one’s knight captain.”

“Understood… Jackie.”

----

The Skaldrian berserkers were renowned throughout the Cleradic Plains as the North’s most bloodthirsty warriors. Famously brutal even within the brutal world they inhabited, they were dreaded and reviled through the tribal plains. Their infamy reached as far east as Qur Don and through Mirria to the west.

This reputation was, at least partly, undeserved.

Marco had lived with the nomadic tribe for many months already, and had come to know them for the peaceful spiritual folk that they usually were, absent contact with the Cleradic soldiers or the Sentin army. In fact, the Guildmasters of Qur Don, in their closed council meetings, over drinks of fine wine and silver platters, talked more about war and fighting than the tribesmen ever did.

Deeply matriarchal, Skaldrian leadership was more often concerned with the movements of the herds, the changing of the seasons, and the shifts of the heavens. Unlike the guilds, they rarely discussed tactics or weapons of war, not to speak of the supposed need of them in securing trade routes. Their bows were for hunting. Their knives for skinning their food. Their axes for cutting wood.

That’s not to say they were unfamiliar with combat. Young men and women in the tribe fought each other for sport, and they did so often and eagerly. But they never came at each other with weapons, and never fought to decide something of any true import among themselves. Judgement was left to the elders and the stars, not to fists or axes. An armed duel to the death for one’s honor was a ‘civilized’ tradition in Qur Don, while the way of these people was more along the lines of friendly sparring matches. Of course, they were still friendly matches where the smallest weight category was set at ‘can deliver a chokehold to a bear’. Marco, admittedly, had grown to enjoy those, but he hadn’t won a single bout yet.

The elders, particularly Eldest Kho, the head tribeswoman, had long left the fighting to their children and grandchildren. They, instead, were chiefly concerned with legends, fairness, and tradition, and with keeping alive the Skaldrian knowledge of the natural, and supernatural, world.

The tribe was well versed in magic, more so that most of the so-called loremasters of Qur Don (prodigies like Scarion, unfortunately, excepted). Most of their magic was divinatory, but they
were also versed in a long tradition of general spellcasting, which became a lifelong pursuit of most tribal women and well over half the men. They all started in childhood, and took years to master even the most basic spell.

Marco soon found that he lacked the patience to learn such arts from them. None of their traditional spells were combat-related, either, so it wasn’t clear how useful they would be to him on his quest to hunt down Hekapoo.

But there were, as Marco well knew, many different sorts of magic. The tribe’s elders were also familiar with ritual magic. Those were the arts which Marco had learned from Allion, and she herself from Scarion before her. Tribe custom dictated that such knowledge only be passed to those who could already use lesser magics under their own power, and who would be less tempted to resort to such bargains unless the situation was truly dire. Marco, as an outsider, was not subject to such care. Once he gained their trust, he was eventually allowed to barter for their magical knowledge with his own.

Eldest Kho knew about the exorcism ritual, and about the light ritual, and she reacted in horror at the idea of Marco’s truth ritual.

“It’s not the way of our people to control the words of another,” she had gently rebuked him.

The ritual of finding, however, was new to Eldest Kho, and to the long oral tradition remembered by the Skaldrian elders. It was that ritual that the Guildmaster of Zonst was able to eventually trade for the one power the Skaldrian berserkers were famous for: the fierceness ritual.

It was the one ritual that most adult warriors in the tribe knew, at least those that had grown up learning any magics. A rite of passage of sorts. It was the one reason, above all else, why their bloodthirsty reputation was, despite it all, well deserved.

Now, months after learning the motions, swearing those to secrecy, and being advised to use them only in the direst of needs, Marco was finally beginning to understand why the tribe’s reputation was so grim…

The battle raged all around him, steel breaking under the weight of stone. There were cries of surprise from one side, and of magically-induced rage from the other. The guildmaster fought on the side of the berserkers, but his help was scarcely needed.

They had been ambushed by Cleradic soldiers, a large company, in full steel armor. The fearsome Skaldrian berserkers had no such weapons. The tribe made their weapons not of metal, but of an obsidian-like dark blue stone.

A huge stone axe-head, heavy as a boulder, fell down on an unfortunate Cleradic soldier, just a few steps from where Marco himself was. It should have been too heavy to lift, almost too heavy to carry. It should have been an utterly impractical weapon with which to fight a phalanx of well-armored men armed with nimble blades. Under the power given to its wielder by the fierceness ritual, the almost paleolithic axe crashed down on its victim with the force of a siege engine and the swiftness of a thrown dagger. It crushed their armor first and their bones shortly after. The man wielding it laughed raucously, celebrating his kill.

They had tried fleeing. They had tried negotiating. Marco had spoken on the tribe’s behalf, from a ‘civilized’ man to another. But there had been a bounty, and there had been their reputation, and the Cleradic soldiers were eager for a fight. The tribe hadn’t wanted war. At least, not at first.

But then Marco saw two dozen men and women stand up, a determined and sad expression on their
faces, and he saw them go over the motions with their hands. He saw their expressions change. He saw the horrifying smiles curve their lips, the unholy fire burning in their eyes.

Now those eyes were filled with bloodlust. That world-famous bloodlust! The Skaldrian men and women howled, they jeered, they grinned with maniacal joy as they cleaved steel armor with stone blades.

Marco saw a woman rip the arm of a soldier with her bare hands, using the supernatural force for which she had just bargained.

He saw a young boy fire a huge war bow, which under normal circumstances even the burliest among the tribespeople would scantily have been able to pull. It was now being worked like a fiddle by an arm that could have uprooted ancient Katato trees. The ‘obsidian’-tipped projectiles flew through the air with such force that they not only pierced the armor of their fleeing enemies, but came out the other end with enough strength to fell a second target.

A moment later, Marco found himself covered in blood, as the man he was engaging in single combat was swiftly decapitated from behind by a young Skaldrian girl. She was no older than he had been back before he first arrived to this dimension. She was beaming with joy.

The carnage lasted but a few minutes, and Marco contributed little to the fight, shocked as he was by the madness overtaking his companions. By the time it was all over, he had promised to himself that he would never use that ritual. He didn’t know it at the time, but it would take no less than the destruction of Mirria for him to first let go of that promise.

As the last few fleeing Cleradic soldiers disappeared over the horizon, leaving a trail of arrow-encrusted dead bodies behind them, the tribe’s unnatural mood began to dissipate. Happy murderous glares gave way back to expressions of sad resignation and regret. Heavy stone axes fell to the ground. After the axes, bodies followed. One by one, the tribe’s fighters collapsed onto the earth, unconscious.

It was not steel that wounded the Skaldrian berserkers that day. At first, Marco thought it was simply exhaustion. He wasn’t wrong. But he also wasn’t right.

“The Beast’s Ritual takes a toll on both the mind, and the body,” explained Eldest Kho. Too old to fight anymore, she had stayed behind. Now, she and the rest of the elders caught up to Marco and the ritual users. “It was wise of you not to use it.”

“I was just following your advice, Eldest Kho,” Marco retorted, simply. He was glad he had, even if that meant his help had been mostly symbolic.

“Indeed you were, friend traveler,” the old woman accepted with a smile. “Not all are so wise at your age, among your people or mine.”

“The warriors… will they be alright?” Marco asked, looking over the now prone bodies of the ritual users. “That was…” he trailed off, incapable of describing what he had just witnessed, of squaring it with the usual behavior of the self-possessed men and women he had gotten to know over the past few months. “They acted like they had all gone mad.”

“They were mad,” Eldest Kho explained. “That’s the toll on the mind. Under the influence of the ritual, a hunger without purpose takes you over. Unless you have a strong sense of purpose of your own, it will cause you to harm friend as well as foe. That’s another reason I counseled you not to use it. We appreciate your help, but under the effects of the ritual, and without any experience taming the beast, that help might have well turned on us.”
“But, the warriors,” Marco insisted, “they kept fighting only the Cleradic soldiers. It was terrifying, sure, but they still seemed to know friend from foe…”

“The tribe is family. Our ancestors watch over our actions. There is no stronger sense of purpose than that,” Eldest Kho added with a soft smile. It soon turned dour. “Even so, the ritual leaves a stain upon the spirit. Your acts are not your own under its influence, and yet you carry the guilt of summoning such power in the first place…”

“Eldest Kho!” called out an old man from a few meters away, standing over one of the collapsed Skaldrian ritual users. “It’s Ulm, the ritual has burned through his heart!”

The elder woman turned around and briskly walked towards where she was being called. Marco, on instinct, followed.

“Oh, foolish foolish man,” she muttered, shaking her head and lowering her fingers to the neck of the collapsed body before them. “I warned him he was too old, that he had seen too many battles. But no, he didn’t listen…”

Eldest Kho sighed and looked up towards the sky for a moment. Then she closed her eyes and smiled.

“Oh well,” she added. “I suppose I am also old. Too old, perhaps, for my own role. It will do, then.” She smiled, bitterly. “Ulm, you better shape up now, alright? You need to be wiser as an elder than you were as a warrior…”

“Um, sorry, but, what’s wrong with him?” Marco asked, trying, probably in vain, to be helpful. Maybe there was something he could do still? He had learned some basic things about caring for wounded soldiers as magister militum back in Zonst, after all. But, well, there was no wound on the body, not even recent bruises. He didn’t even know where to begin.

Eldest Kho, ever the teacher of her people, looked to him with a kindly expression. “That’s the toll on the body, which the ritual also takes. The price is small at first, but with each use the ritual gives its user more and more strength and fury. The strength must pass through the body. It flows through the veins. It seeps through the flesh. More than anything else, it lives in the heart.”

She pointed at her own, with two fingers right in the middle of her chest.

“There are only so many heartbeats in a lifetime that the body can survive while channeling the ritual’s fire. Like a piece of lumber, eventually one burns down to ash,” she continued. Marco could hear the decades of knowledge in her raspy voice. He wondered how much of Eldest Kho’s apparent age was the effect of time, and how much was the effects of the same magics the woman was now explaining. “I retired from using the ritual four winters younger than this fool did.”

She looked down towards the apparent corpse, with a sort of wistful regret.

“But, but you said he would ‘shape up’… that he would have to be wiser as an elder…” Was she somehow talking about the afterlife, then? “Isn’t he… dead?”

“No. Not yet. His heart is stopped, but he lives still. In a moment he will be gone, except for what I am about to show you,” Eldest Kho spoke. “I’ll teach you one more ritual, and I ask nothing else in return. Consider this my gratitude for fighting with us, and for following my advice before. Pay attention, child, as I will only do this once.”

Eldest Kho sat down besides Ulm’s fallen body, and began a series of gestures Marco hadn’t seen
before. He tried his best to commit them to memory.

“You know,” she smiled to him, “I am not so very old or so very wise that I don’t fear it, after all...”

Then she said a word, a single word in the ancient tongue, and collapsed to the floor, her own heart stopped. At the same time, the prone body in front of her began breathing again. The same as all of his exhausted brethren, he seemed to be, not dying, but in a feverish sleep. There was no flash of light, no stunning visual display of magical power, just the efficient trading of a life for a life.

That night, a ceremony was held for Eldest Kho, and Ulm himself delivered her body into the flames.

Ritual magic always had a cost, a terrible cost. It was why the nomad tribe, well-versed in the magical arts, used such powers only as a last resort. All the same, there was nothing which said the person using the ritual had to be the one to pay the cost. All that was needed was someone willing to volunteer in their stead. The old woman had just demonstrated how to make that willingness known to the ancient powers. The tribe called it the Gifting Ritual, and Marco eventually would come to know it as the Ritual of Exchange. He never did use it, and would never ask anyone else to use it for him.

A few days later, Marco would leave the Skaldrian berserkers behind. There were more Hekapoos for him to track down. But, also, it just wasn’t the same without Eldest Kho.

----

Marco woke up sweating, yet cold. He could feel a warm sensation spread from his chest, slowly making its way through the rest of his body. His fingers, his toes, however, all felt as if made of ice, and his eyelids weighed more than his tired facial muscles could lift. His head throbbed painfully.

“W… where?” he forced his lips to ask, amidst the darkness of his own making.

“Shhh, Marco, it is going to be ok,” came a soothing voice from above him, a man’s voice. “Take it easy. You are not done healing quite yet.”

“O… Orel?” he confirmed.

“Yes,” the voice answered, simply.

Slowly, Marco was able to make out the sensation of the lieutenant’s strong yet delicate hands on his torso. It was from those that the warmth came. The human managed to open his eyes ever so slightly, only to be blinded by a bright golden light. He closed them shut again.

“W… what happened?” Marco asked. “What’s h… happening now? W… where is… Jackie?”

“Don’t worry, she is alr… she is unharmed,” Orel corrected himself. “You, on the other hand, nearly died.”

Marco’s eyes shoot wide open, and then shut again as the light stung and burned them. He tossed around for a moment from the sensation, which only led to further pain as every muscle in his body protested the exertion.

“I am sorry, Marco, I should not have said anything yet,” Orel apologized. “Please, do not move. This will only take a few more minutes. Jackie will be back shortly.”
It took Marco a few seconds to realize what was it that felt unusual about that statement. Orel had not said ‘the knight captain will be back shortly’, but ‘Jackie’.

“A few more minutes?” Marco asked. “A… are you sure? I… I feel like crap.”

If anything, ‘like crap’ was optimistic, he thought. But, even as he did, he could feel the cold receding and the throbbing in his head fading away. He clenched and unclenched his fist. It was uncomfortable, but not painful.

“This is only the final stretch, Marco,” Orel spoke, as one of his fingers began tracing down long meandering lines through his stomach. “The fact that you feel, well, as you said, akin to excrement, is only a sign that your nervous system has been restored in full. I’ve also mended the ruptures of your internal tissues, and repaired the harm you did to your blood vessels. All that I am doing now is help circulation restart.”

“The fierceness ritual,” Marco concluded.

“So… you knew?” Orel asked, mildly surprised. His palm moved across the sides of Marco’s lower abdomen and legs.

The human realized, from the sensation of the touch on his bare skin, that he was completely naked. Despite everything that had happened the night before, and despite the rather particular circumstances, that thought made him a tad bit self-conscious.

“You knew what you were doing to yourself?” Orel insisted, calmly, interrupting the human’s thoughts of personal modesty.

“Not entirely,” Marco admitted. “But I suspected it.”

Before the dream just now, he hadn’t remembered that he had already seen the ultimate consequences of the ritual. Still, he did remember it was not something to be used without a good reason. At first, he had thought that was because of the way it changed his mind, the way it made Marco more violent when under the effects of the magic. That was part of it, true. But, at the same time, there was the way his body strained under its effects, not just his mind. It always felt as if his heart was going to explode whenever he was under the effect of the ritual.

‘It fucking did, Marco! I felt it!’ said an uncharacteristically terrified voice inside his head. Kar was still around. Good.

“M… my heart… exploded?” Marco asked aloud. He would have opened his eyes once again, startled, but he had learned his lesson.

He heard Orel’s weariness in his silent bracing breath, more so than in his tone right after.

“Yes, Marco, it did. That was the first thing I had to fix,” he explained. “And please tell that foul creature to remain as deep within yourself as it possibly can. I do not wish… rather, I promised, not to cure it too, by mistake.”

‘Cure’ him as one cured a disease, of course, not a patient.

“You healed my exploded heart?” Marco asked, incredulously, ignoring the whole Kar bit for now.

“‘Burst’ might be more accurate,” Orel reassured him. “Think of it as a really bad stroke. Which is why you really shouldn’t be playing with that stuff.”
Marco wondered for a moment what it meant that the mage was able to heal him. He had only ever heard of one way to undo the price of the fierceness ritual, and that was the ritual of exchange. Then again, he had forgotten all about that too, until just now, when he dreamt of Eldest Kho and her sacrifice.

“Are you…?” Marco asked. “Are you taking on the harm to my body into your own or something crazy like that? Because if you are, you need to stop! Jackie needs you…” he argued.

Orel simply laughed.

“Whatever gave you that idea?” he asked. “No, I am not hurting myself to heal you. Although it is somewhat tiring, what I am doing is not dangerous right now. My light is made for healing, for restoring life, just as well as for undoing the mockeries of life.”

Marco relaxed at that. Still exhausted, he let the next few moments pass in silence.

After a while, Marco tried carefully opening his eyes, though only a quarter of the way through. The golden light around him was still there, but he discovered his sight could adapt to it. Slowly, he was able to see the outline of the curly haired man, in full robes and armor, kneeling by his side, laying his healing hands upon his flesh.

They were mostly over his chest and torso, but occasionally Orel would move a palm or a finger somewhere else in Marco’s body: his arm, his leg, his navel, the small of his back. Wherever the mage’s touch went, warmth followed, as the human’s blood flowed more freely through the healed areas. The healthier Marco felt himself become, the more embarrassed he also felt about the whole situation.

As he adapted to the light, the human slowly opened his eyes fully. He focused on the man’s face. His delicate features were set into a look of rapt concentration, very different from his usual calm bearing. Much like that last night with Jackie, Marco found himself appreciating such glimpses of emotion shining through the mage’s serene temperament.

Speaking of that night, well, it had been weird. That last part, with Jackie and Orel, in particular. Marco had somehow known what Jackie wanted, the way she was eager to see the mage’s lust break through the impassive facade. He had felt that want too, as if it were his own. That was the reason he had thought of provoking him with his words as Jackie did with her actions. Was that all that Marco was feeling now? An echo from Jackie’s own wish to see the man emote?

Also, did that mean the link was still active? It hadn’t felt like previous times. It was a more muted, more ambiguous, sensation. But Marco had felt Jackie’s wants, when he was with her, and when she was with Orel. Had he imagined that? Because, if he hadn’t, then that was something he needed to tell Jackie about, sooner rather than later. In fact, if he hadn’t, then it was possible that… well, that Star was on the other end of that link. What if she had been able to see them!?

“What happened back in the cave?” Marco asked the mage, worried. “After I passed out. Where is everyone else?”

Slowly, hesitantly, Orel explained. He told Marco about the wound he sustained, about carrying him out on Sunbolt, about Jackie fleeing, about the final battle of the air raiders.

“I… I am sorry,” Marco said, weakly.

Sorry for the man’s loss, and also sorry he had become a burden for him to carry. Orel had saved him, instead of any of the many comrades he had probably known for years. It had probably been
for Jackie’s sake, but Marco still felt that he owed the man not just his life, but an apology. And
that was without even going into the fact that him being there was likely the whole reason Star,
Midnight, knew where they were! The link. It had to have been the link. If he and Jackie hadn’t
been sleeping together again, maybe those people would still be alive. ‘Sorry’ didn’t quite cut it.

“As am I, Marco,” Orel replied. “We still don’t know why the attack came when it came, but it
occurs to me that Midnight’s forces might have followed me back. Perhaps the Aestus Memoria
was not as unguarded as I first thought, after all.”

That, of course, was also a plausible explanation. Though Marco gave better odds to the theory that
said it had all been his fault. That was usually the safe bet.

“Besides,” Orel continued, “if I had known about your, um, ritual, I would have warned you
earlier, or at least healed the cumulative damage of all the previous uses.”

“Are you doing that now?” Marco asked. Orel nodded. “Um, so, do you know how long can I fight,
next time, before my heart explodes?”

He was hoping he didn’t sound too demanding, or even ungrateful. But it would be good to know.

“An hour. Maybe less. Two if you are not burning it all in one bout,” Orel replied. “But, Marco,
there really shouldn’t be a next time,” he admonished.

“I’ll keep it to half an hour,” Marco promised. “And maybe, if it’s not too much to ask, you can
heal me afterwards. But, Orel, the air raiders are gone now. Aren’t they? That ritual might be all
that I have with which to protect Jackie. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t do the same.”

Orel smiled at Marco, lifting a single hand to the human’s cheek as the light in his palm began to
fade away. Slowly, he then removed both hands from his body altogether. Marco felt, to his
astonishment, like a brand new man.

“Perhaps, Marco,” the mage admitted. “But please remember: Jackie has the glass blade. Whatever
my thoughts on it, she can protect herself from most enemies. She can’t protect herself from the
pain of losing you.”

----

Midnight’s world was a deadly unforgiving wasteland. That much was true. The areas Jackie knew
about, along all three sides of the inland sea, were either burning desert, where fresh water was
scarce, or the petrified forest, where it was non-existent. And yet, at least in the former, life fought
on. It clung to a dying earth with uncanny tenacity and all the vast resourcefulness of nature.

The creatures of the desert had adapted not only to scorching days and blood-chilling nights, but
also, on the whole, to surviving in a world that included both Midnight’s spells and each other.
Most were crafty little burrowers, hiding under the sand at the first sign of trouble. A few more had
hard reflective skins: an armor against both sun and predators. Many were nocturnal, and nearly all
could spend some number of days without drinking.

To all the tricks of the Earth xerocoles, the creatures of this world added knew ones, as well. The
enormous mound-shaped lizard, for example, turned itself into stone during the day. Such trickery
both protected the water inside its blood from evaporation, and allowed it to warm just enough to
keep it active through the night, when it hunted for prey. The six-horned quilled fell-hare instead
used its many pointed spikes to dissipate the extra heat, and the poison inside them to deter all
other perils.
The sleipnirian goat, for its part, had only speed as an advantage. A speed that was no match for that of a dragoncycle in flight.

It had taken Jackie about an hour to spot a herd of the small and nimble ungulates. It had taken her less than a minute to dive down and give chase, until the glass blade found purchase into the tender skin underneath the reflective white fur of their slowest member. Soon, she had loaded the corpse of her eight-legged prey onto Pearl’s back, and taken off once more up towards the sky.

Jackie didn’t fly directly to where Orel and Marco were waiting for her. Instead, she took off in an unrelated direction, then rose up, until she could feel the air getting thinner around her. She looked down, and around, trying to spot any of Star’s undead iron unicorns, or any other spell below her. Finally, with the blinding morning sun giving her cover from anything looking upwards, Jackie turned around towards her actual destination.

It was probably all for naught, of course. Who was to say that Star couldn’t see her now? That she couldn’t track her wherever she went, watching over them without the need of the visible eyes of her emissaries? She had found the air raiders’ hideout, after all. It had been in one of the few supposed blind spots for her nascent omniscience within this world, and yet she had found it all the same. Had the rules changed? And, if so, how?

So, yeah, Star could probably see Jackie now, clear as day, flying back towards the makeshift desert burrow that Orel had excavated for them with his magic. It was alright. They wouldn’t be there for long. She looked around as she began descending, out towards the horizon, in all four directions. No signs of an army of flying undead warnicorns, no dragons made of ghostly black smoke. Not yet, at any rate.

Pearl descended gently upon the sand, and Jackie dismounted, carrying the goat carcass with her. She caressed the dragoncycle’s muzzle gently, and gave her a brief path in the neck.

“Thanks for the ride, girl. Be safe. Cry out if there is trouble,” she instructed.

Jackie then cut two drumsticks out of the goat’s eight, and gave them to Pearl raw. She preferred them that way.

What the sky-faring creature didn’t like at all, however, were cramped spaces. So, instead of following Jackie into the hole in the earth before them, the dragoncycle stood outside, keeping watch. She didn’t seem too affected by the morning heat, either. A dragoncycle was still partly a dragon, after all.

It was only then that Jackie walked into the burrow’s opening, a tiny crawl-space of dislodged sand and excavated stone below it. Inside it, she saw the first genuinely good bit of news in the last twenty-four hours.

“Marco!” she shouted. “I am so glad to see you are ok!”

He saw her too and smiled back, his eyes brightening up, just as hers probably had. He had been resting on Sunbolt’s golden fur, same as Orel, trying to make the best out of the cramped space. He was also back in his pants and his still somewhat bloodstained jacket. But, most importantly of all, he was awake!

She ran towards him, and before he could stand up to do the same, she crouched down to hug him tightly. An instant later, she realized that she hadn’t even stopped to think that he might not be recovered enough to withstand that. Fortunately, he apparently was. Strong as an ox, actually, given the force with which he hugged her back.
“All thanks to Orel, actually,” Marco pointed out.

“I…” Jackie turned left towards the other man, who was calmly lying beside them on the griffon’s wing, eyeing the former knight captain with gentle eyes. “Thank you,” she said.

It hardly felt like adequate words to express the actual depth of her gratitude. Instead, she extended out an arm, welcoming Orel into the hug. Those two were all Jackie had left.

“So, Jackie,” Marco noted, amused. “I don’t mind you two at all, of course, but could we get white-fur here out of the group hug? It’s kinda dripping even more blood on my jacket, never mind poor Sunbolt.”

The griffon let out a short annoyed cry of agreement.

Jackie realized that she was still holding the bloodied goat carcass as she hugged Marco and Orel. She laughed and pulled herself away. “Right, right. Sorry about that.”

She placed their breakfast on the floor. She cut Sunbolt three full legs and a good chunk of the torso as an apology and threw them raw in front of the half-falcon half-leopard creature. Then, using the crystal blade, she removed the long horns of the sleipnirian goat. Magnificent heatsinks, those, they would never be able to cook it properly with those on.

“Orel, please, if you’d do us the honors,” she asked.

The mage smiled, walked up to where she was, gave Jackie a quick peck on the lips, and placed both hands over the goat.

“Thank you for your life that brings us nourishment,” he said to the remaining piece of the corpse, and then his hands began to burn with a bright searing white fire.

In a matter of minutes, they had three goat drumsticks to share, plus loin, ribs, and brisket, all cooked to perfection.

“I suggest that we eat quickly,” Orel reminded them. “We need to keep on moving.”

----

“So, that magic you’ve been using, the ‘rituals’,?” Jackie confirmed, “it caused your freaking heart to burst!? And you knew it would?”

They were on the move again. Orel was riding Sunbolt, while Jackie flew Pearl ahead. Marco himself was on the dragoncycle too, sitting behind his girlfriend, holding onto her from behind.

“I didn’t exactly ‘know’,” he protested.

“But you suspected it!” she pointed out.

“All the rituals have consequences, Jackie,” Marco explained, sheepishly. It was obvious that the reason Jackie was angry at him was because she was concerned for his safety, but it’s not like he would have been safer without the ritual. If he didn’t have it, he probably would have been killed, or well, um, captured really, by the first undead warncorn that crossed his path. “The point is knowing when it’s worth paying their price.”

“And yet, based on what you told me, you were using this thing constantly. Not only in fights, which, well, I sort of get. But, at one point, to kick down a fucking door!?” she protested.
“A door out of the underground tunnels, which helped us avoid walking directly into Sta… into an ambush, yes,” he admitted.

Jackie tensed a bit. She seemed to think it through for a second. “Ok, and you couldn’t have just asked Kar to smash the edge of the door with a rock until whatever the locking mechanism broke down?”

Marco wasn’t sure, actually. “It was a pretty solid door. I am not sure that would have even worked.”

“But you didn’t even try,” Jackie pointed out. “Right? You just went ahead and, um, hulked out at the first sign that it might be useful to do so…”

“She’s got you there, kid,” Kar pointed out, unhelpfully, as Marco’s arm, currently around Jackie’s waist, suddenly transformed into the monstrous tentacle.

“And, you say all the rituals have consequences?” Jackie asked after a brief pause. “Do you mean that you were also burning down your body when you were holding that ghost lizard thing with magic? Or when you do that weird thing to find your way?”

“Actually, no. The cost is different for each ritual. The finding ritual, for example, takes a memory each time, but I am pretty sure it can’t actually cause me physical harm,” he offered. He wasn’t about to explain to Jackie the cost of the exorcism ritual. He wasn’t sure she’d believe him. What exactly did it even mean to add weight to one’s own soul?

“A memory?” Jackie’s tone was a frightened one. “Marco, how many times have you used that ritual? I remember it being… frequent, even back when we were going through Sam’s place.”

“Honestly? A bunch, Jackie,” Marco admitted. “But, look, it isn’t that bad. People forget things all the time. Don’t tell me you remember everything perfectly, like, stuff from back on Earth or…”

He stopped himself. He didn’t want to point out those thirteen years Jackie had spent in this place, not after what had just happened the day before. That life had literally gone up in flames before the girl’s eyes and, in all likelihood, it was all his fault.

“What are your parents names?” Jackie asked.

“Rafael and Angie Diaz,” Marco answered without hesitation. “I also remember you, and Star, and Tom, and Hekapoo, and Janna. Star’s parents are Queen Moon and King River Butterfly, and…”

“Where did you go to school, in Earth?”

“Echo Creek Academy.”

“Who was our math teacher?” she asked.

Marco paused for a moment, silent and perplexed.

“I… I don’t remember,” he answered. “I guess maybe that’s one of the things I forgot. But, well, I guess that’s not too bad. I mean, I remember math. It’s just the teacher. I just don’t remember him in particular…”

“Her, actually,” Jackie pointed out. “Miss Skullnick, and she was a troll last time you saw her. So that’s not the kind of thing you’d ‘naturally’ forget. How about your classmates? You say you remember me and Janna, but, um… Ferguson?”
Marco tried to recall the name, all he could remember was that Jackie had mentioned it during dinner with the air raiders, and he wasn’t about to bring that up.

“Alfonzo?” Jackie asked, after a while.

Nothing.

“Marco, those two were your best friends for years,” she spoke, pityingly. “You three were inseparable for most of elementary school. How about, um… Britney? Oskar? Becky? Pauline? Francis? Sabrina? Ingrid?”

She kept going, and soon Marco realized that his memory of school seemed to consist of him sitting in a classroom that contained no one else but Janna, Jackie, and Star. If he focused just enough on the specific memories, he could even see the inconsistencies, the blank spaces where there logically ought to have been another person.

“I didn’t learn karate all by myself, did I?” Marco asked, quietly.

“No,” Jackie confirmed. “You trained with a bunch of people at the mall dojo. I don’t know the instructor’s name, though. You always just called him Sensei.”

So, he had forgotten one of his martial arts mentors as well. He remembered the techniques, but not the wisdom behind them. It was not unlike forgetting about Eldest Kho, like he had before last night’s dream. Who had this Sensei of him been? Probably a learned practitioner, full of deep spiritual insight and knowledge. Marco’s sense of loss only grew at that idea.

“Marco… who else, but your parents and those of us you left with, do you remember from Earth?” Jackie asked.

To his horror, Marco realized there was no one else left.

He thought hard about it. He really did. He tried to recall a name, a single face, and failed. He knew of some people, famous people, celebrities and what not. He could remember a few people in Mewni and elsewhere: Moon, River, Hekapoo, Rhombulus, Kelly, Buff Frog, Glossaryck… but no one from Earth, no one he knew personally.

“Marco, I am sorry,” Jackie’s voice softened. Marco held tightly onto her. “But, I think… God, Marco… I think you should not use that ritual anymore. At all. I think that’s even worse than the fierceness ritual. I…”

Marco felt himself weak and hollow. He couldn’t help but to agree. Who was he? What had his life been about before he left Earth? He remembered his hobbies, his values, his thoughts, but none of the people who shaped them. None but…

“Jackie, I think you are right,” he admitted. “I think… I think if I ever use the finding ritual again, I think the next people I’ll forget… are my parents.”

The last two people he remembered, for which he only had Earth memories.

---

“So, what now?” she asked the two men sitting besides her, under the cover of stone trees.

It was uncharacteristic for the knight captain of the air raiders to not know what to do, to not be the decider, the one with the plan, however flimsy that plan was. But the air raiders were no more, and...
Jackie Lynn Thomas was no one’s captain, or knight.

“I think,” Marco was the first to answer. “I think the plan hasn’t really changed. I think the best lead we have as to what happened to Star is still down there. I am just not sure we can manage it without…”

He stopped himself from mentioning the air raiders, as if Jackie weren’t already thinking about them, as if him pretending they had never existed helped her hold together better. That was pretty dumb, honestly, but his heart was in the right place.

It wasn’t what he said or didn’t say that kept Jackie whole, however. It was that he himself was still standing. Marco, who had forgotten nearly all the people he knew in Earth. Marco, who had had his heart explode on him and was now suggesting that they go back for seconds. If he could do it, then she could too. Besides, she needed to be there to protect him. It was one of two things that kept her going.

“I should reiterate,” Orel volunteered, his tone harsher than Jackie had ever heard it, even if that wasn’t saying much, “that I can take care of the creature below. My main concern is the entrances. Clearly we were wrong: they are guarded. I cannot fend off Midnight’s avatar, or the fullness of her armies.”

“I am not sure they are guarded, actually,” Marco pointed out. “I think she found us through… other means…”

He meant the link. Marco had spoken to Jackie about it already, after their talk about the rituals. He had confessed about sensing her own desires as they all lay together, about it possibly leading Star to them. He had cried, and he had apologized, and he had acted like that was his fault more so than hers. He was stupid like that sometimes. She should have realized it too. She should have realized that by being together with Marco once more, she had put not just him, but everyone else in danger.

It couldn’t be Marco’s fault, because it was, and would always be, hers and hers alone. She had been the one responsible for the air raiders’ safety. And, whether by sending Orel to the Aestus Memoria or by having sex with Marco, it was her who had led them to their death. It was her who had betrayed them, who had failed them, like she always did.

Was that what had caused Star to go after Jackie’s other lovers first? Was she always able to sense when Jackie had sex? She really ought to take a vote of chastity at this point, then, at least until Star had been dealt with, assuming Jackie could even get to her now…

Vengeance.

That was the second of the two things that kept her going.

“Look, it’s a long story,” Marco said. He wasn’t talking to her. Orel had asked him a question, and he had, embarrassed, avoided answering.

Jackie didn’t hear the question, but she could imagine what it was about. They hadn’t told the mage yet what the link was. It was hard to talk about it with him. So they had both just hinted that they thought the fault for the attack was not likely Orel’s at all.

‘Jackie Lynn Thomas, you are such a hypocrite!’ she berated herself. It was, after all, the same thing Star had done to the two of them, so many years ago, except way worse. Jackie had been mad at the mewman princess for lying about the link, even without a body count being involved, back
in that dumb princess school with the vampire bitch. Not that it mattered now. Now Jackie had real reasons to be mad at Star.

She thought for a moment, and decided she would explain the link to Orel later. Right now, she needed all of them focused on the next steps, not past mistakes. She didn’t know if the information would make Orel hate her. It should, of course, the air raiders had been his siblings in arms just as much as her own, but the mage was strange, particularly when it came to emotions like hate and anger. Like he had said, he didn’t afford himself to feel either. Still, if he reacted the reasonable way, then they’d be down an ally, and Jackie was the one who couldn’t afford that right now. Plus, even if the story didn’t faze Orel, Marco would surely get sidetracked into trying to take the blame for it.

No, Jackie had to make Star pay for what she did, before she even started atoning for her own mistakes.

“Are you certain enough about this, Marco,” Orel insisted. “That we can afford the risk of walking into an ambush?”

That brought her back to the matter at hand.

No, probably not, Jackie thought. There was always the chance that they were wrong. There was something… different about the link, for her and, by his own admission, also for Marco. It could well be that it hadn’t been that at all. Either way, she couldn’t count on the entrances not being guarded.

“With all undue respect,” a fourth voice joined the conversation. “There might be another way to get down there.”

“And that way would be…?” Orel huffed annoyedly at the tentacle. Clearly, those two were still not in the best of terms.

“Well, there are three entrances to those tunnels we know of, aren’t there? Two which might or might not be guarded, and another which is too close to one of the other two for comfort…” Kar reasoned. “At the same time, the tunnels themselves stretch for days. No way their entire length is being guarded.”

“The point being?” the mage grumbled.

“The point being that we don’t need to take any of those three particular entrances,” Kar continued.

“So, you are suggesting we just go and find another of the supposedly mythical gates to this world’s so-called ‘ underworld’?” Orel asked. “Easier said than done.”

“I am suggesting that we make our entrance,” Kar grinned victoriously. “As for how to do it? Well, Marco over here definitely shouldn’t be using the fierceness ritual for that. But we could certainly put that burrow excavating magic of yours to good use!”

“That’s not how it…” Orel stopped himself. He sighed. “No, no, fine, I could do that, if we knew where the tunnels themselves were. I don’t assume you can sense them underground or something?”

“No,” Kar admitted. Then, he grinned, a toothy side-ways grin. “I just happen to have seen a
map of those same tunnels, and went through them counting doors and steps. I also happen to have a memory that works, unlike that of you three featherless bipeds.”

Did Orel actually smile at that comment? No, Jackie must have imagined it.

----

The passageways below, under the effects of proper illumination, looked quite different from last time. Still, on the whole, Marco’s first impression, formed under the dim light of the finding ritual, had been correct. They resembled subway tunnels, more than any sort of ancient catacombs.

He and Jackie were both carrying torches, currently unlit. They were made of dry enough timber and grass, and soaked with enough goat fat, that they could be easily ignited at a moment’s notice. The problem was, they wouldn’t last long once set aflame. Ten, maybe twenty minutes each. For now, they weren’t needed. The bright white light coming from Orel’s outstretched hand was more than enough to see the subterranean world around them.

The walls and floor seemed to be made of concrete, or something like it; a manufactured material, at any rate, rather than natural bedrock or carved stone. The ceiling was covered in the long oval broken light bulbs he and Kar had seen the last time they were here. The doors they had passed so far were machined steel, clear as day. This place wasn’t just technologically advanced by the standards of a medieval society. It was, or had once been, as advanced as Earth itself. Perhaps more.

The most interesting feature, however, the one Marco and Kar had both missed the first time around, were the symbols. Every few meters along the tunnel’s walls, and on every door, there was writing, or, at least, some sort of pattern. Tiny grids of black and white triangles, like some sort of alien QR code, and below them numbers in Riradesh. No words, however, just a decreasing numeric sequence.

Kar had been right. He had remembered enough of the maze’s structure to find a place where a tunnel passed through close enough to the surface for Orel to dig down to it. The place in question would have been a few hours march away from Sailor’s Ridge on foot, but only ten minutes or so of flying. Not far away enough for comfort, but far enough to risk it.

Orel had sat down on the ground and pressed his hands to the earth. Slowly but surely, the dust had started flowing away. After the soil had been cleared out, he began melting the rock beneath it, creating a diagonal shaft of incandescent red-hot walls that eventually crossed the existing tunnels of the underground. After that, it had just been a matter of waiting for the opening to cool down enough for the three of them to walk into it.

Pearl and Sunbolt had stayed outside. Marco could only hope they were safer there than Orel, Jackie, and him were down here.

The more they all walked back towards the abbey’s entrance of the tunnels, the more Marco focused on listening intently, on peering into the shadows at the edge of their light. He waited to hear the horrifying voices, to see a tentacle slither through the bend on the passageway, to come face to face with the eyes and teeth of the creature who dwelled in the bowels of this labyrinth.

“Marco,” Jackie whispered to grab his attention. “Look at this.”

Reluctantly, he turned back, away from his self-imposed sentry duty. A few steps behind him, Jackie had stopped to examine one of the closed doors. She had been doing that a lot. Marco had just given up after the first dozen or so.
The thing she was pointing at was the panel of strange triangles written on the door. Kar had mentioned that they were all different patterns, not two doors’ alike, but it wasn’t like they could make heads or tails of them, so… why bother?

Except, Jackie wasn’t actually pointing at the pseudo-QR-code, but rather at a few scratches in the metal below. They were so hastily made that at first Marco thought that was all they were: scratches. Until he realized they spelled something.

‘Crap’

It literally just said, ‘crap’. Even more bizarre: it said ‘crap’ in English! Sure, the stroke in the middle of the ‘A’ bleed all the way over the ‘R’ to the middle of the ‘C’, and overall it was all barely legible as far as the calligraphy went, but it was English nonetheless.

“Do you think…?” Jackie asked.

Marco tried not to get his hopes up. “There are other dimensions besides Earth that use English.” Which, to be fair, was something he had wondered about many times before. “Besides, we don’t know how long that has been around. It could be days or it could be a thousand years.”

One thing was certain, that wasn’t Star’s or Tom’s handwriting.

The next few doors they found were similarly labeled. Each and every one of them proclaiming to contain, well, ‘crap’. Marco was getting a very familiar vive about the handwriting too, but that might have just been his own wishful thinking.

A dripping sound made them pause for a moment. They stopped, listening for more. No other noises followed. They kept on moving. Despite Orel’s bright white light and his assurances about his prowess as a demon fighter, Marco felt ready to jump at his own shadow. Down here, that might just be the sane thing to do.

‘Storage,’ read the rushed scribbles underneath the next door.

Well, it was more promising than ‘crap’, at least.

Marco considered for a moment trying the fierceness ritual and opening the door, before remembering that he was supposed to find a rock instead or…

Before he could suggest anything, Jackie cut four separate slashes along the edges of the steel sheet in front of them, in quick succession, and then kicked the nearly door-sized cut-out down towards the other side. The thick metal rectangle fell back with a loud thud.

Right. Unstoppable magical sword and all that…

The path labeled ‘Storage’ turned out to be mostly a long hall of concrete shelves, full of broken glass pieces and half-melted resin gadgets. Marco didn’t have any idea what any of those did, except that they were further evidence that they were dealing with something other than your usual medieval society. It was all obviously broken and useless now. The screens, if indeed those were screens, were cracked and long dead. It sure wasn’t ancient pottery, though: glass, metals, tons of the plastic-like resin for the external casings, in various shades of blue, white, or black. No wires, not even on their cracked open insides. Instead, there was even more glass within the resin, hidden from view, which made no sense.

Further inside the dead-end hallway was an even weirder sight: a sort of spider-web bunched up around a person-sized shape.
“Um, anyone else getting the vive that we walked into the set of the Alien movies or something?,” Marco joked, nervously. For the record, he knew that was the opposite of helpful.

Jackie simply walked up to the egg-sack looking bundle and cut it open with her blade. No monster jumped out of it. No half-eaten human corpse fell from it. Instead, what spilled to the floor was a single blood-splattered sleipnirian goat.

It was dead, of course, but just as fresh as the one they had eaten for breakfast that morning. The thought made Marco’s stomach stir in a rather unpleasant way.

“Um, do you think there is any chance wild animals just, well, wander down here?” Jackie asked.

“Didn’t see any the last time around,” Kar answered for him.

“And this doesn’t seem like Devouring Horrors’ doing,” Marco added. Not that he would know it for sure, but… “I mean, I think they would just, well, devour it… not store it for later.”

“Ok. Fine. Then let’s also keep an eye out for spider spells, spider monsters, or like, spider anything really,” Jackie suggested, following the words with a tired sigh.

The next four doors were all labeled ‘CRAP’. They opened one of them, just to check: broken high-tech gadgets, but no egg-sacks.

So, then, ‘storage’ meant… the goat?

Another dripping sound, and a sort of slow deep slithering noise. They stopped to listen for nearly a minute but, as suddenly as it had started, the sound was gone once again. Frankly, given the options, Marco half-hoped it would be the spiders. They pressed on.

The door that followed was labeled ‘STINKY CRAP’. None of them was too keen on confirming that description. It was followed by two more instances of ‘CRAP’. The last one had a cross and an arrow pointing in the direction the three of them were going, the direction of the descending Riradesh numbers.

“What do you think, Marco,” Jackie whispered. “‘X marks the spot’? Or, ‘danger ahead’?”

“If it is actually Janna,” Marco finally admitted what they were both thinking. “Then it’s probably both.”

Jackie smiled weakly, and nodded.

There were too many conflicting signals. On the one hand, who else would write all these labels in English? Tom? No, it didn’t add up. Tom wouldn’t have stayed down here any longer than Marco. Star? Again, no. Marco knew Star’s handwriting, and this wasn’t it. Another extradimensional visitor? Possible, but unlikely. So, it had to be Janna, right?

But, on the other hand, why would Janna label a monstrous spider meal as ‘storage’? To mess with them? Well, Marco wouldn’t exactly put that past her. But how did she know they would come here? And wouldn’t she have more important stuff to discuss with them than a prank like that?

Besides, Janna had been in this world for decades, and she had made an enemy of Star… of Midnight. The chances that she was still alive were, well… not great. And, sure, she could have written all those messages eighty years ago, but the eight-legged goat had been freshly dead, and its sack was the only thing that apparently differentiated ‘storage’ from ‘crap’. Maybe that room was just were the spiders always made their nests? Or maybe storage just meant something else that
they hadn’t seen? Something that had already been removed, perhaps many decades prior?

There were four more ‘crap’ doors. They left them all alone. Slowly, an uncomfortable sensation of being watched was creeping onto Marco, but try as he might, he couldn’t hear or see anything but the three of them.

Finally, they arrived at a door with a different label:

‘C.R.’

“What’s that even supposed to mean?” Marco complained, whispering to Jackie.

“Maybe it’s crap again, but they just got lazy,” Kar offered.

“Let’s hope that’s not it,” Jackie retorted, unsheathing her sword.

Two vertical slashes. Two horizontal cuts. A swift kick to the middle of the metal sheet.

There were stairs going down on the other end, the first they had seen in this area of the underground. The sound of the falling broken door tumbling down the hard concrete steps was deafening. It echoed through the hallway in both directions for a long dreadful minute.

There was a brief instant of silence. Marco almost started to relax. But then, the brief quietness was followed by the shrill cries of a thousand inhuman mouths. A fetid wind blew through from the far side, not of the door they had just opened, but of the main tunnel.

Before they could even begin to react, the shadows at the edge of Orel’s light began to grow longer, to extend into the light, blotting it out. Huge jet black tentacles erupted into their tiny island of illumination, shattering the illusion of safety that the light had hitherto granted them. The flesh of the thing, if flesh it was, was so dark that it seemed more like a hole in reality than anything material. Light did not reflect from that flesh. It did reflect, in terrifying fashion, from the thousands of pale white teeth along hundreds of mouths growing from each sinuous appendage. It did reflect from the innumerable red glowing eyes of the beast, glaring at them from the darkness.

The things that followed the tentacles were even stranger. There were segmented limbs, like those of an insect, but longer and branching fractally like the branches of a tree, crawling at the space in front of the feeble quad-limbed figures they clearly regarded as intruders. After those, came a wide array of malignant protrusions that Marco’s mind simply refused to recognize, sights that his brain was simply incapable of mapping to any one fixed form.

“You are (back / trespassing / alive / whole / not alone?)!” “(We / I / The Swarm) bids you welcome again.” “We have (been told what to do (with / about) you / figured out how to keep you (alive / happy / for her!))” “Mother shall (soon) come for you!” “You (must / shall / will) surrender.”

Orel raced in front of the other two. To his credit, he seemed unfazed even in the presence of so much that was alien and terrifying. He lifted both hands before himself, and a semi-translucent wall of golden energy rose between the three of them and Devouring Horrors Hell Swarm. The barrier of light flowed swiftly from floor to ceiling, fully sealing them off from the rest of the main tunnel ahead.

“Marco, Jackie, go ahead. I’ll catch up!” the mage shouted, as an inchoate tentacle hit the magical barrier. The force of the impact spread from the spell onto the concrete walls around them. The earth itself shook with a small tremor.
“Wait! No. Orel, you shouldn’t fight this thing alone,” Jackie offered, recovering from the horror a second later than the former lieutenant, lowering her hand to the nacre scabbard by her waist.

Marco hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do. If there ever was a time to use the fierceness ritual again, it certainly would be now. But, still, he couldn’t get Orel’s words out of his head: ‘she can protect herself from most enemies, she can’t protect herself from the pain of losing you.’

Maybe he ought to try the exorcism ritual? It didn’t seem likely it would work, but…

Orel pulled a hand back from the barrier and quickly pointed a finger to Marco’s torch. A spark burst from within the flammable material, setting it alight, shocking the human out of his thoughts.

“Didn’t you two hear what it said?” Orel admonished the other two, with forced restraint. “Midnight is coming! We don’t have any time to waste. I can fight this thing. I can beat it. Trust me. But we can’t fight Midnight. Not yet. We need to be done here before she shows up. So, run! Find out what you can. I’ll meet you back at the exit, or at the meet up point if all else fails. I promise. Go!”

Marco looked at Jackie. She looked back at him, then at Orel. Finally, she nodded. Thirteen years of fighting together… if anyone knew when to trust the mage and when not to, it was her. Jackie ran towards Marco, grabbed his hand, and dragged him running through the fallen door. To the path labeled ‘C.R.’

He followed.

“(Halt! / Desist! / Surrender!)” “This (feeble) barrier will not (hold / stop / distract!) us.” “We are the (limbs / eyes / teeth!) of Midnight.” “We have been (given / granted) our (command / instructions / purpose)” “You (shall not / cannot / must not / will not ) escape (us / I / The Swarm)!”

They could only hope that Orel knew what he was doing.

Chapter End Notes

This was likely the last IStASE chapter with a direct Habit-style flashback in it, but not the last with a connection to the Habit Mythos. The title is, of course, a very intentional shout-out, besides being a literal reference to Marco’s bad habit of reaching for the rituals to fix things ;)

On a related note: Happy Birthday, Grade!

Thanks for being a source of inspiration, not to mention an outstanding co-author elsewhere.

**Coming up next:** Chapter 39: Myth and Prophecy
Chapter 39: Myth and Prophecy

Jackie raced ahead through the underground tunnels, stopping only to quickly check the scribbles along the doors, or to allow Marco, still carrying the cumbersome lit torch, to catch up to her. She really hoped Orel knew what he was doing.

He had never given her reason to think otherwise. The lieutenant of the air raiders was, if anything, famous for his ability to get himself out of deadly trouble, even when it seemed impossible. No, *especially* when it seemed impossible. It was why she often trusted him to guard their retreat, why she hadn’t batted an eye at the idea of him staying behind at Sailor’s Ridge to distract their pursuers, and why she had trusted him to go back there to check the Aestus Memoria’s gate by himself, even knowing that Midnight’s armies might be lying in wait. It was thanks to him, too, that she and Marco had escaped last morning’s attack. Orel had survived over a decade of flying with the air raiders, taking just as many risks as Jackie herself did, if not more. Their relationship would never have worked if Jackie couldn’t trust the man to take care of himself.

And yet, this was different. The air raiders were no more, there was only the three of them now: Marco, Orel, and herself. The thing behind them had not been one of Midnight’s usual spells. It was something worse than the flying undead warnicorns, than the land narwhals, than even the dragons of fire and smoke that had brought down the air raiders’ hideout. It had spoken to them, in that horrible cacophony of alien voices. It was smart, smarter than the other spells, at least, capable of speech and argument. It had more limbs than she could count, and each had seemed a terrible weapon. It oozed magical power…

Jackie didn’t think any of them should be facing that thing alone. Together, she had no doubt in her heart they could beat it. Letting Orel fight it by himself, though? It felt wrong. Still, the thing had spoken to them, and what it had said, was that Star was coming. Alone or together, they weren’t ready to face her yet. As much as Jackie wished they were, they just weren’t.

So, Orel was right, they didn’t have any time to waste. She had to trust him, and she had to hurry up.
“Another one, Marco,” she called out. “Stand back!”

She cut down the door to their left with Sam’s glass blade.

They had been following the scribbles, those barely legible English letters scratched on the walls along every metal door. The one they both ran through after Orel told them to leave him behind, the one labeled ‘C.R.’, had led them to another long hallway. Within that hallway was yet another series of doors. Most were unlabeled, a few had been marked as ‘crap’, and a single one was again labeled ‘C.R.’ with an arrow pointing to it, leading to another long hallway which repeated the same pattern.

Again and again, Jackie and Marco followed those two letters along the maze. Each door led to a hallway, and each hallway had a single door with ‘C.R.’ written by it. They raced through the endless tunnels with that label as their dubious north star.

Crown Records? Control Room? Core Reactor? Central Rail? It didn’t matter. Whatever it was, it was important enough to label the route to it through this whole labyrinth, and that was enough for her.

Star was coming. That huge spell had said as much. Jackie hoped that, whatever that ‘C.R.’ thing was, it was something they could use against their former friend. Knowledge, weapons, it didn’t matter. Otherwise, this whole incursion had been for nothing. Otherwise Orel was back there, risking his life, for nothing.

It wasn’t a matter of escaping alive from Star’s pursuit, either, or of figuring a way to redeem her. Not anymore. Star, Midnight, whatever her name was now, whatever she was now, her crimes could no longer go unpunished, could no longer be forgiven. Or, at least, Jackie could no longer find it in her to forgive.

Fifty-nine deaths, just from yesterday’s morning, not to even mention Gwendolyn, Adalheidis, Eirikr, Kara, Ythul, and so many others over the years. And those were only the people she had known well. How many others had died because of Midnight’s whims? How many lives destroyed by praying to the evil deity of this world? How many murdered at the hands, and fangs, and claws, and horns, of her living spells? How many deaths on Star’s conscience? How many on Jackie’s own?

After she had found Marco again, back in Sailor’s Ridge, Jackie had begun to think that maybe Star could be brought back, that maybe she wasn’t Midnight. Things didn’t add up, after all. The texts spoke of the deity’s arrival as something ancient, lost in time, while Marco swore Star couldn’t have crossed the portal more than a century ago, by this world’s own count of time.

It had been a convincing theory and, for a few hopeful days, Jackie had bought into Marco’s naive optimism. Because, she realized, even after thirteen years in this broken world, even after all she had seen Midnight do, even after speaking to her avatars and knowing how painfully obvious it was that they all spoke like Star, she had always wished for it not to be true. She had always hoped it wouldn’t really be Star. That she wouldn’t have to kill her.

Now, she just hoped she could.

It was the only way. After all, ‘...death shall be the one to claim her.’

That was what Cass had warned them about, wasn’t it? That last bit of the prophecy, the one saying that Star would die, that she should die. It wasn’t meant for Star herself. It was meant for them. It had been meant for Jackie, and Marco, to hear. And it hadn’t been a dire fate to prevent,
either… but an admonition to do what had to be done.

Another turn, and another labeled door. Jackie cut through it, almost by reflex at this point, and then…

They both stopped in their tracks.

“Uh, um, that’s different,” Marco was the first to speak.

Behind the door was a short lit corridor. The alien light bulbs in the ceiling were broken, just as they were nearly everywhere else within the tunnels. But, along the sides of the passageway, there were these long sturdy strips of red-tinted glass. A sharp crimson light pulsed regularly within them. It almost felt like an alarm should be blaring alongside the flashing lights, but this room was as silent as the rest of the underground maze. A quietness interrupted only by the two human’s own hasty breathing, and by the occasional tremor from the distance.

Jackie knew what those tremors meant. They meant that terrifying spell was still striking at Orel’s magical barrier. They meant the mage was still fighting the abomination. They also meant, reassuringly, that he was still very much alive.

There was another gate at the end of the strobing red corridor. This one was taller and wider than the others, and just as obviously machine-made. There were crystal panels of sorts embedded in the door itself, but they were thoroughly cracked, revealing the smooth steel below them.

There were no random English scratches around this door. Instead, above it, a large abstract drawing had been machined into what seemed like a golden metal plaque. It was a continuous and irregular pattern, pleasing to the eyes in a hard to describe way, and it seemed to spread out of the center of the plaque like a web of meandering ornamental designs. It didn’t really seem like writing to Jackie.

But, apparently, it did to Marco.

The boy muttered a string of words in Riradesh. She recognized the cadence of the old language, but wasn’t able to pick up the meaning from it.

“What does it say?” she asked, following his eyes and surmising that Marco was reading the plaque.

“Six to be one,” Marco repeated, a confused expression on his face. “One in safety and in prosperity, one to bring life through… um, this one is a bit hard to translate… maybe… ‘through the flow of trade’?”

“Ok, so, some sort of motto?” Jackie asked.

It probably didn’t matter that much, though. She lifted her sword, hoping that what was behind the door was more useful than what was written on it.

“Yes, it’s a motto, Jackie,” Marco explained. “One I’ve heard before, many times.”

“Uh?” Jackie held off from cutting down the door quite yet, just in case Marco was about to explain that it was some sort of warning or something like that.

“I’ve recited it before, actually, at the meetings of the Council of Guilds. It’s the opening oath of the guildmasters of Qur Don. Except, that’s only half of it. It then goes…”
He continued in Riradesh, haltingly, as if trying to remember the original before translating.

The lights around them flashed orange, then blue, then red again. Out from behind the door, a voice spoke back, in that same tongue. Jackie couldn’t really make out most of the words, but she did catch Marco’s name.

She turned around towards the boy, who looked utterly confused. “Well, what did they say?”

“They said that…” Marco began, only to be abruptly cut off by a different voice. A polite calm voice, speaking English.

“I said: ‘Welcome to the command room, Guildmaster Marco of Zonst. The Qur Don Alliance is at your command, such as it is.’”

The door in front of them slid open gracefully, revealing a small circular room. Six chairs, made of that plastic-like resin substance they had encountered before were arrayed around a half sphere of opaque black glass. Above the glass floated a translucent disembodied head, the room’s sole occupant. It smiled pleasantly at them.

----

Orel’s smile was a serene one, even as the monstrous limbs struck repeatedly against his barrier. Both his hands were raised forward, maintaining the shimmering wall of golden light between prey and predator. He wasn’t afraid. He welcomed the impending struggle against this infernal creature. And yet no so much so that he wished to hasten its start. The longer the shield held, the further away the knight captain and Marco Diaz would be able to get. The longer they had, perhaps, to figure out this place’s secrets.

They were all hoping to find something that would help their fight against Midnight. They had no basis to expect such key to even exist. It was an irrational hope. An act of faith. But, if there was a way, then down here, within the ruins of a place that should never have existed in this world, guarded by a conjoined legion of fiendish horrors, was certainly one of the better places to look for it.

Orel had faith. He had faith that there was a plan. If not their plan, then the Plan. He had faith that, sooner or later, a way to stop Midnight would be made apparent, and that he would be around to see it. He hoped - although he couldn’t really be certain of it - that it would be found without the knight captain coming to harm.

“Your (lowly / infuriating! / limited) magics (will not / cannot / shall not) hold us (forever / much longer)!” “We have been given no instruction (regarding you / to spare you)!” “We will (soon) (kill / rend / devour!) you.”

The creature chattered on. It wasn’t angry, though its strikes became faster and faster, harder and harder, as it spoke. It wasn’t eager, though the words dripped with hunger. It wasn’t really a conscious entity, after all, but a magical construct. And to the extent that it was aware, it was aware in imitation of the minds of demons, which were themselves soulless creatures, incapable of moral choice, undeserving of mercy.

Orel wasn’t angry either. He too wasn’t eager. He may be more aware than the mass of blasphemies before him, but, in the end, his own moral choices were also a product of his basic nature. He too, was a soulless instrument.

“I need it not to hold forever, creature, and I also have been given no orders regarding you.” He
pondered this for a moment. “I do not believe I shall spare you.”

It was true. He had been given no instructions regarding the spell, or others like them. His standing orders were to stop Midnight, at any cost within reason. That’s why he had been sent here, to the former domain of the Forger of Scissors.

To his shame, he had thus far failed in that task. Nonetheless, eliminating Midnight remained his sole mission. Destroying this abomination, on the other hand, was just him operating on the generally good principle of not suffering demons, or things that looked like demons, to live.

There was a loud crash behind him and to his left. Orel smiled and jumped out of the way. A spike-covered black tentacle burst out of the tunnel wall besides him and crashed around the spot on which he had previously stood. The man smiled and dropped the barrier. He had wondered how long it would take the foul beast to come up with that plan. If anything, he had perhaps overestimated his foe’s intelligence.

“Best way to get past an immovable object is, of course, to go around it,” he conceded. “Took you long enough. For my part, I’ll have to confess that I’d much rather go through you.”

He raised his sword, and a blinding flash of light flowed through the blade, turning it white hot and incandescent. A circle of golden light covered his lower left arm, forming an improvised buckler made of magical force.

Spikes and fangs, inchoate tentacles and segment insect-like appendages, all descended upon him at that very moment. Self-composed, Orel jumped out the way, blocked a toothy clamp with his golden shield, and sliced away a shadowy pseudopod by way of counterattack, all in a single swift coordinated motion.

“You are fast” “(Unnaturally / Inhumanly / Annoyingly!) fast.” “As fast as us(!/?)” “You (are not / cannot be) flesh.” “(We / I / The swarm) know this to be true…” “What are you?”

That had been Orel’s other reason to delay this fight, and to send Jackie, and Marco, ahead. They believed him to be human like them, or ruman, or something else close enough. A being after their own image. Orel had to admit that he didn’t wish to disabuse them of that notion. Perhaps it was unfair of him to keep such secrets from his friends and allies. But, in truth, he much enjoyed them thinking of him as one of their own.

Aiding the knight captain had at first been but a means to an end. His mission was to stop Midnight. When he had found that, on his own, he lacked the power to confront the false goddess, Orel had endeavored to find allies. Jackie Lynn Thomas, leader of the newly formed mercenary band of the air raiders, had seemed his best bet among the very short list of champions this wounded world had to offer.

He had come to her, chosen the name ‘Orel’ as a nod to the traditions of her home dimension, and pretended to join her cause as a way to enlist her on his own. It didn’t take long before the pretense became reality, and the original plan mere self-delusion. There was a force of personality to the knight captain of the air raiders that Orel would never be able to match. Expedience became respect. Respect became admiration. Admiration turned into love.

He would have wanted to say love became trust as well. But could it be fairly said he trusted her, when he had to hide from her the basic truth of what he was?

She kept secrets of her own, of course, that much was obvious, but he doubted any would be quite as grand a lie of omission as his own.
Orel blocked a branching vine-like limb with his blade, cutting it off from the mass of monstrosities before him. He lifted his shield, right in time to block a heavy battering-ram of a tentacle from knocking him down. He jumped away as twenty fanged appendages descended upon were he had just stood, evading them.

He was serene. He was calm. He was not afraid, and not eager. He did not even especially relish the opportunity to let go of the pretense of weakness he had kept up for over a decade. Most importantly, he certainly wasn’t enjoying this in any way other than the pious joy that came with doing good. His light couldn’t be wielded in anger, after all, nor in cruelty. He could only act in the service of justice.

Demons, even constructed demons, must be defeated, they must not be allowed to roam free. Besides, in removing them, he was also helping Jackie and Marco help him accomplish his sacred mission. Nothing less and nothing more. A righteous and necessary act.

Orel grinned, wildly.

---

The holographic head was monochrome orange and semi-transparent. Its resolution - if that was even the right word - was quite high, showing the face’s features in life-like detail. It was the features themselves, however, which were remarkably lacking in specificity: neither male, nor female, as easily in their twenties as in their fifties, pleasant to look at in a strange abstract way, bald, perfectly symmetrical, and prototypical in every way Marco could perceive. Its expression was unblinking, yet gentle in its patiently polite stare. It said nothing and emoted only a soft reassuring smile.

It was like staring at the platonic ideal of a human, or, well, ruman, face. It was the most head-like head you could conceive of, and thus, obviously, one that could belong to no actual living person. A face designed by committee.

“Um, hello?” asked Marco, tentatively. “Who are you? And how do you know my name?”

“I am a remnant of the mind of Qur Don,” they replied. “I know all names that Qur Don has seen fit to record.”

“The ‘mind’ of Qur Don?” Marco asked. “As in the country of Qur Don?”

“The very same,” the mind responded, patiently.

“So, you are… an AI?” Jackie confirmed, sounding about as shocked as Marco himself felt.

“A… I… ?” the floating head repeated, uncertain. “I am afraid I do not understand. Perhaps more context would allow me to compare. I assume those letters are an acronym. Could you unroll it for my benefit?”

The voice was calm and polite. Its choice of words strangely precise. Yet, the tone was not what Marco had expected from a machine. It was not the least bit robotic, just solicitous. Unnatural, sure, but only in the same way as that of a hotel receptionist.


“I see,” their translucent interlocutor seemed to ponder for a moment. “Yes, that term seems accurate enough, then. I am both artificial and, I hope, reasonably intelligent,” it joked. “My builders would have used a term like… well, ‘Self-Seeing Replication’ is perhaps the closest
Marco, of course, knew exactly which word the disembodied head was trying to convey with ‘self-seeing’. They were right, though, it was hard to translate. He might have used ‘self-aware’, maybe, but that was wrong too, just in a different way. Perhaps… ‘self-reflective’?

Marco had seen many strange things in the wild wide multiverse, not just in Hekapoo’s dimension, but in Mewni, and beyond. They hadn’t all been fairy-tale kingdoms, either. Some places, like the bounce lounge, or that weird arcade dimension, were clearly technologically, or, well, techno-magically, advanced. But this? This was something straight out of Earth’s science fiction!

‘Huh? I honestly don’t see what the big deal is, really,’ Kar grumbled silently inside Marco’s head. ‘So, someone made them by some method other than plain old fucking, and they can talk? Big whoop. Like that’s even unusual!’

Right. Kar had a point, actually. Seen from a certain perspective, the living spell too was an A.I. It’s just that Marco was so used to Star’s spells being alive that he didn’t normally think about the implications of her basically summoning sentience on demand. Oh, and there had also been that one gift card entity in Quest Buy too, now that he thought about it. Although he wasn’t sure if that had been something created by magic or just summoned by the card from somewhere else…

“Um, Marco,” Jackie interrupted his thoughts. “Didn’t you say that the people you remember from the last time you were in this dimension couldn’t have built concrete tunnels and sliding metal doors? I am going to assume that meant they also didn’t have, like, computers, or whatever this, um, person, is? Any chance this is maybe some part that hasn’t come back yet? You know, from your dreams?”

“No… I don’t think so…” Marco frowned. “When I was here, Qur Don was this… well, it was barely a nation, more like an alliance of trading guilds that had each sort of grown into their own little feudal kingdom and then joined together into a loose federation of sorts. They had steel and horses, and magic, not, um, subways and computers. I assume progress somehow marched on from there.”

The hologram smiled politely. “This is true. Marco of Zonst was a guildmaster one-hundred ninety-seven thousand four hundred and twenty-eight years before the founding of the first grand republic, which was some fifteen hundred years before the beginning of this world’s industrialization, which in turn was a full extra century before the advent of automatic computation three thousand four hundred and seventy eight years ago.”

“Right…” Jackie eyed the ‘mind’ suspiciously. “So, the thing is, even if Marco was one of the leaders back in the time of the horse and carriage, how come he is still counted as one now? Not that I am complaining, but it just doesn’t add up. How come you even recognized him?”

“I did not. Not at first. In fact, even after I registered that he was speaking the mother tongue, I had to re-analyze the digitized old archives to find enough information to identify Guildmaster Marco of Zonst for certain. It is not like there are photographs available from that time. There are a handful of oil portraits on record, but they are, let us say, distorted, by the artistic fashions of the age. It is mostly legends and trade ledgers. The actual chain of evidence is hard to explain. However, I am quite certain it is Marco of Zonst that stands in this room, even if I do not exactly understand how it is that he is still alive after all this time,” the mind explained.

“As for his authorization,” it continued. “Well, Marco’s former post as guildmaster of Zonst has been, for all legal purposes, rescinded. There have been seven different constitutions between then and now, not to mention nearly three hundred breaks and re-establishments of the guilds’ peace
before that. I am afraid, under normal circumstances, you two would not have even been granted authorization to enter this room. But Marco of Zonst does have a…” It paused. “…democratic claim to power.”

‘‘Democratic’?’ Marco asked, not understanding.

“Yes,” the hologram replied. “As the last living citizen of Qur Don, you are, for all effects, both its people and its leader. Welcome to your nation, Guildmaster. Population: 1.”

A grave silence followed the A.I.’s grim declaration, and Marco could feel Jackie’s eyes on him. Was she trying to gauge his reaction to the news? See if that affected him or left him in shock? Honestly, she didn’t have to worry. Marco knew that everyone he had known back then was long dead, and he had already suspected that Qur Don as a whole had been destroyed. If anything, this all seemed to indicate it had taken a lot longer than he had originally imagined. He wasn’t shaken by the news, even if it sounded wrong to admit it. He was mostly just confused.

How exactly had this world gone from medieval to futuristic, then right back to medieval? Why was there nobody left alive, yet this, um… person? thing? computer? AI… was still working? Plus, there was also the matter of, um…

“How come you can speak English?” Marco asked.

“I do not know,” the floating head admitted. “Data integrity around this matter is… questionable. I am being told that I, quote, ‘shouldn’t be asking questions I don’t want to know the answer to’, end quote. Suffice to say that is a puzzling result to get from one’s own databanks.”

Ok, that definitely sounded familiar! Not that it helped Marco actually explain much of what was going on, but at least he had a pretty good idea about who had been involved.

Alright,” Jackie nodded, probably reaching the same conclusion as Marco and taking it in stride. “We don’t have all the time in the world here. What data do you have on Midnight?”

“I infer from context that you are not interested in the time equidistant between sunset and sunrise,” the mind replied. “If that is true, then I did not understand the question. I must ask for clarification.”

“What data do you have on the evil deity of this world?” Jackie asked, slightly exasperated.

“I am afraid some of that information is sensitive,” the head replied. “I need the guildmaster’s permission to comply.”

“Uh? Um. Right. Sure, you have it,” Marco said.

“The so called ‘evil goddess’ of this world, who secretly kept our civilization’s magical and technological development stunted for uncountable eons, vanished nearly forty thousand years ago, ushering an era of prosperity that lasted over thirty-eight millennia,” the mind explained. “What else do you wish to know about the one called Hekapoo?”

----

“You do not tire! (Nor does The Swarm / Nor do we / Nor us)!”

The swarm’s words rang true. Neither the spell nor Orel were any more tired now than at the start of their battle. The movements of the shadowy monstrosities fast as lightning itself, and Orel’s own merely a fraction ahead.
If the knight captain had been here to see it, or anyone else of her species, the whole battle would have looked like a blurred mass of black, red, and bone-white, constantly criss-crossed by a single zig-zagging beam of golden light and sparks of white hot fire. But for Orel and his adversary, the chaotic spectacle unfolded into a fluid dance of endless strikes, blocks, counters, and parries.

For all that he was the superior fighter, Orel was no closer to victory than the monstrous thing before him. There was no center to the inchoate swarm. No bit of it, no appendage or nodule, was more important than any other. Cut a tentacle and two more took their place. Pierce an eye and a fanged mouth would be born from the oozing hole. Rip the mouth apart and each half grew out into its own segmented spider leg, which in turn became a tentacle, with its attendant eyes and mouths, the second you hacked at it. The pattern wasn’t regular, but the result was always that the more Orel ‘wounded’ the swarm, the more of it there was.

It was pointless. But it was also exhilarating.

“We can (stand / afford / suffer) to make mistakes, we (wonder / doubt / will discover) whether the same is true for you!” “Or (are you / do you think yourself) (perhaps) infallible?”

Infallible? No. Orel had no such fatal hubris. He knew that if the battle went on long enough, he would miss a block, he would fumble a parry, and the spell would rip his flesh apart. Would he be able to heal the wound, before it irreparably ended his mission?

“And tell me, demon, can you regrow yourself forever?” Orel retorted.

He knew he should end this, sooner rather than later. He knew Midnight was coming. He knew it was unacceptable to imperil his mission just for the sake of prolonging this one battle.

But he had spent the last decade frustrated, running from an enemy he couldn’t fight, feeling his sacred goal slip further and further from his grasp. Observing others suffer - observing the knight captain, Jackie, suffer - all because of his own inadequacy, had carved deep scars into his innermost tranquility. When the forces of Midnight had come one final time for the air raiders, Orel had been forced to balance the need to help his friends, with that of keeping his cover. He wasn’t yet sure that he had made the right choice.

The one before him was an enemy he could face, an evil he could defeat. It was his natural prey. It made his own existence have a purpose once again.

Orel wasn’t ready to let go of that feeling. Much to his astonishment, he was enjoying the fight.

----

“It was only during the last millennia of the Qur Don Alliance that the anthropological and geological facts were fully correlated with the historical record, unearthing the true nature of this world,” the mind explained, as a series of three-dimensional models of ruins and dug quarries, covered in faint translucent walls of Riradesh text, unfolded in the air around them. “The ruman species, along with most life in this dimension, was discovered to have been artificially created by an intelligent extra-dimensional entity, only partly ruman-like in her appearance and modes of thinking, for purposes that remain her own.”

Ancient stone bas reliefs, medieval paintings, silken tapestries, bone and wood carvings, cave drawings, all unfolded within the projected images of orange light. They all depicted the same horned female form, distorted by the various different styles of ancient artwork, but nonetheless unmistakable: Hekapoo.
Her purpose, Jackie thought, was the scissor quest. The scissor quest Marco had gone through the first time he’d been here. She saw no point in interrupting the A.I. to tell them that. Not yet.

“Evidence soon began to mount regarding two disturbing facts. First, that our technological and magical development had both been impeded, time and time again, by that same being. Every time that a significant scientific revolution would have otherwise occurred, a cataclysm of some sort - geological, epidemiological, mystical, and in two separate cases cosmological - would plunge ruman civilization worldwide into a renewed dark age. We have not been able to attribute all such events to the entity calling herself Hekapoo, but strong evidence links her to over one-third of them, and weaker links implicate her in most of the rest,” the voice continued, dispassionate, didactical.

“This process went on, as far as we understand, for at least a quarter billion years, or nearly five times as long as biologically modern rumans have existed. We have indeed found evidence that ruman physiology was allowed, perhaps encouraged, to change faster than technological development.”

Why? To adapt to changes on the species of the scissor quest participants? Jackie glanced at Marco. She knew he was fond of Hekapoo, despite all she had put him through. But this? It made her sound just as bad as Midnight!

Jackie had spent half her life with the people of this dimension. Artificially created or not, they were just like them: they lived, they loved, they died. They felt happiness, and fear, and sadness, and so much despair. What gave Hekapoo the right to use them as just the mere setting for her messed up games?

“Second disturbing fact, in a more doctrinal sense, is that the one named Hekapoo ceased interacting with this dimension between forty and fifty thousand years ago,” the mind continued. “This allowed rumans in general, and Qur Don in particular, to experience its multiple scientific, industrial, political, and eventually information and space revolutions.”

As the mind spoke, Jackie and Marco were treated to a new series of changing translucent orange holograms, showing various complex objects and the heads of unknown, presumably famous, rumans. It all began with things that looked vaguely familiar, like large sailboats and windmills, through huge hive-like multi-floor buildings, then flying machines, then a single rocket lifting up over a map of the world around them. Interspaced with those: equations, diagrams, and machine parts.

Some of the forms, like the recognizable shape of the rocket, and the planetary model of the atom, were very familiar to the humans. But others were bizarre and alien, particularly as the light show advanced further and further into this world’s strange future. A divergent technological path from Jackie and Marco’s own.

“Unfortunately, the eventual discovery that the world had had a creator, and that all of our progress went against said creator’s plan, led to significant anxiety among certain nations,” the A.I. kept talking. “In the end, this led to industrialized religious war on a global scale.”

‘Figures,’ thought Jackie, bitterly.


“Whether right or wrong, Qur Don took the anti-theist position as a matter of state policy,” the mind continued. “At that time, our nation was two decades into the only viable industrial lunar outpost. Over the following six years of devastating planetary warfare, which forced most surviving world-bound population centers into underground structures, we were able to assert full
control of the far orbit.”

Above their heads, along the ceiling of the small room, a constellation of strange triangular shapes that Jackie could only infer were spaceships, or satellites of some sort, looked down at the war torn world-map, menacingly.

“Bolstered by its space superiority, Qur Don eventually won the conflict, forced the remaining pro-theist nations into unconditional surrender, and begun a generational process of… would the guildmaster prefer I say re-education?” The hologram flickered away, entirely, except for the talking androgynous head. “In any case, less than a century after the war, the Qur Don alliance had achieved planetary hegemony, not to mention full territorial control over the moon, and was granted, by treaty, the only effective space fleet. Additionally, as part of our advanced weapons research program during the war, we became aware of the existence of other dimensions, and our position within the cluster of three neighboring dimensions.”

The image showed three orange spheres now, engaged in an intricate cosmic dance with one another. Right. Tom had described Hekapoo’s domain as a cluster of three dimensions as well. Marco seemed to be looking at the simulacrum in front of him with something akin to surprised recognition.

“It was proposed that dimensional travel could be more fruitful and less time consuming than space exploration, as the two nearest dimensions both appeared to possess other solid worlds within them,” the A.I. continued.

“Wait!” Jackie stopped it. “Does that mean there are no other planets in this dimension?”

The mind seemed to take a moment just to process her words. “There are a number of celestial bodies in this dimension, of similar composition to this world’s sun, but no other solid bodies beyond ours and its former satellite, or for that matter any other celestial bodies not undergoing either nuclear fusion or extreme gravitational deformation.”

The hologram adjusted to match, showing a vast tapestry of tiny solitary stars, with a single satellite revolving around just one of them, and yet another rock revolving around that one. Given the vast distances involved, and how large the stars and the planet were shown to be compared to the empty space between them, Jackie knew it wasn’t a scale-faithful representation. I was probably more of a visual aid to explain the mind’s point.

So, the entire universe had only what was necessary to host Hekapoo’s scissor quest: it had stars, because the night sky needed stars, but no other planets, because, well, why bother?

Was it really easier to have just one without the other? Jackie didn’t think so, but she didn’t know enough astrophysics to be sure. Even if she did, well, this whole world ran on magic in the end. Maybe Hekapoo had picked and chosen its physical laws, just like she had picked and chosen its celestial bodies?


Jackie blinked. Right, that was the question they needed to be asking, actually! Not how this world was made, but how to beat Midnight. The ability to get out of this place and look for help was always a good possibility to explore, if nothing else.

“We were not,” the mind replied, disappointingly. “In fact, some people conjectured, briefly before the end, that it was that attempt that drew the attention of the second entity, that the pro-theists had been right after all, that the actions of the being known as Hekapoo had been for our own benefit. It
was not meant, they argued, in those last few minutes of horror, that we may know quite so much, that we may venture quite so far."

“The second entity?” Jackie asked, suspecting what was coming next.

The images around them changed once more. They were still in space, but rather than stars, they were looking at a wall of long semi-cylindrical shapes: spaceships. They looked sturdier and far more complex than the triangular vessels from before the war. It was impossible to tell given the distorted perspective, but they were almost certainly much larger as well.

They were all arrayed in a semi-spherical formation, facing what looked like a huge portal opening in the middle of the void. The swirling vortex was orange, like everything else in the monochrome hologram, but something primal inside Jackie’s mind told her it ought to have been green instead.

“The entity came from beyond our dimension. It opened its own portal, seventy-three light-minutes away from the surface of our world,” the mind explained. “Out of what at the time was thought to be an abundance of caution, the second and third fleet of Qur Don’s space superiority force were deployed to intercept. We originally believed that the entity in question was the one called Hekapoo. A resolution was passed to ascertain the return of the creator and repel, contain, or, indeed, destroy her. We were fearful we would be forced back into a new dark age if we were not able to dissuade her of it by force. As it turns out, we were not nearly afraid enough.”

As the A.I. spoke, the books of the priesthood suddenly came to her mind.

‘And the armies and ships of men stood defiantly against the deity, declaring in their pride that they were beyond the reach of the divine. “We have mastered the powers of the heavens, and rejected the heavens' mastery over us,” they claimed, one and all.’

Jackie knew what was coming next.

A dot emerged from the portal, tiny compared to the huge spaceships. Like a three-dimensional magnifying glass, a bubble appeared over it, showing a vaguely female, vaguely human, figure. It had six arms and butterfly wings. It shimmered and distorted, such that even as an orange hologram it seemed quite less solid than the rest of it, as if made of smoke… or fire.

The ships attacked it at once. Orange streams of… something, Jackie didn’t dare guess what, flashed across the span between the fleet and its target. Then, she realized that maybe, those could be what she was looking for: weapons from this supposedly advanced space-faring civilization!

“What are those?” she asked. “Lasers?”

“No. Streams of kinetic projectiles, half a meter in diameter, one ton in mass each,” the mind explained, “fired continuously, reaching over a twelfth of the fundamental limit.”

Huge cannon balls, essentially, fired in a burst like machine gun bullets, flying at eight percent of the speed of light. Maybe if they could get their hands on something like that…

The orange streams seemed to curve in mid-air around the being that emerged from the portal, going harmlessly around it.

…it would help them in absolutely no way.

The creature’s hands extended out, reaching across the gulf of space, growing larger than the, presumably huge, ships in front of it, and crushing them as one would an aluminum can. On the non-magnified view, it looked like a mass of four wings and six gigantic arms emerging from a
single dot in space, destroying the ships one by one, leaving behind burning spherical explosions. Debris and ship fragments fell down into the holographic world map forming below them.

‘And the deity wept at their vanity, which had brought them to meet their doom. And the deity cut a wound in the sky that rained fire upon the earth and waters. The seas boiled, the mountains trembled, and men were cast out from the serenity of the star-filled heavens, and into the darkness of the long reign of Midnight.’

The way the remains scattered over the map below, and how many of them missed the world’s surface altogether, made it obvious that the representation was distorted in several ways. It was impossible that the ships had been as close together as they looked to be, and the entity from the portal had probably been a million miles further away still. It was all a reconstruction. But, then, the hands… the fiery arms reaching across a planetary-scale distance… had those been real? Could they have been?

As the fleet of the Qur Don alliance broke into disarray, the entity, Midnight, flew across it, finishing off the few remaining stragglers. It flew past it, towards a bright orange sphere in the holographic display. At first, Jackie thought it was this world’s sun. Only when the sphere exploded, and a million shards rained upon the world map below them like a deadly downpour, did she understand what she was seeing.

She had failed to notice it during the history lesson, too wrapped up in the parallels with Earth history to realize what was out of place in the whole tale of Qur Don’s rise to dominance. They had conquered the moon! That meant this world had once had a moon! One she had never seen in the thirteen years she had been here.

‘And the deity broke apart the heavenly rock, and its rubble blanketed the whole length and width of the world.’

So, that was the meaning behind the dusk priesthood’s texts, the truth of this world’s and Midnight’s origins? Jackie watched the fragments of the crumbled moon rain upon the world, turning lush forests and massive cultivated fields into barren desert wasteland, leaving few areas untouched.

Strangely, the petrified forest around them was one of the rare places to mostly avoid the devastation. Was it already stone back then, or flush with life? The orange hologram, shown from far above, didn’t answer that question either way.

One thing was obvious, however, watching the carnage happen. This thing wasn’t Star. It wasn’t the mad possessed mute girl that spoke to them with their best friend’s voice. It wasn’t the mewman princess turned bad. It was something stranger still, and so much worse.

----

Orel grinned as once again his blade cut through a mass of unnameable protuberances emerging from the living shadow before him. He laughed as a bestial mouth bit a piece of his shoulder. His light mended the wound as soon as it was made. He was an emissary of high justice, made for battling evil. This was his element, his purpose for being.

“Do you tire now, demon?” he shouted. “Do you feel fear!”

“We (do not! / cannot / were not made to do so).” “But we grow curious, (ever so curious), as to what you are.” “(She / Them / Midnight) will find you… (puzzling / fascinating / dead!” “You cannot do this (forever / long), we (see you / feel you / hear you) tire.”
That wasn’t entirely true.

Orel was self-aware enough to recognize he was getting more and more sloppy the longer the battle dragged on, that much was certain. He routinely left minor openings unguarded, allowing the beast to land a few hits on him once in a while, relying on his healing arts to negate the damage. However, at the same time, he still took care of fully preventing any strikes that would be difficult or costly to fix. It wasn’t that he was so exhausted that he was slowing down. On the contrary, he felt positively full of energy!

If anything, in his exhilaration, he had become ever less cautious with the vessel that was his body. It was, in the end, a temporary one.

But while repairing his own wounds was not particularly taxing in any one instance, over the long run, if he kept spending power on it, eventually he would tire. He was certain by now that he was becoming diminished at a faster rate than his opponent, despite seemingly inflicting more physical harm. This could not continue indefinitely.

Orel could make it end at any time, of course. He simply loathed the idea of it. He was having too much fun! He knew his blade was ineffective in terms of finishing the demon, but it was the battle that was satisfying, not the killing. Every fiber of his being was made for this sort of struggle.

He lunged forward, his white hot flaming sword slashing a dozen fanged tentacles, his shield of golden light blocking a piercing stinger coming from the right. He grinned, triumphantly.

An instant later, Orel realized his mistake, as the scythe-like tip of a long segmented arm dug into him from the right. It pierced his flank, cut through his skin with a sickening wet sound, followed by the crunch of his ribs breaking.

The power of the hit, and his own momentum, sent the former lieutenant flying into the opposite wall. A thousand limbs descended upon his body, ready to feast on his flesh.

There was no flesh to be had.

Instead, the many-fanged creature struck yet another wall of golden light, a circular bubble around the humanoid figure with the presumably broken spine. Orel smiled at it.

“You are (not of flesh / not of blood / not of bone)!” “Yet you (tear / crack / bleed / whimper!)” “Is it (deceit / a lie! / a ruse!)” “What are you!?"

It was deceit, and it wasn’t. He was flesh, and more than flesh. Orel’s body cracked and broke just like any other, and then reformed just as quickly, ever rebuilding itself under his own inner flame. But this? This was a costly wound to fix. He could not afford many more like that. He could not afford to let the fight continue, enjoyable as it was.

“Creature, I am what I have always said I am,” he declared. “The name I gave my friends, and which I now reveal to you, my enemy, is Orel. Does this mean anything to you?”

“It means nothing to (us / I / The Swarm)!”

“In the traditions of my dearest friend, it means light, heavenly light in particular,” Orel explained. “Tell me, demon lurking at the foundations of the world, swarm of hellish shadows, do you fear the light of the heavens? Do you fear the sun?”

“We guard the depths because that’s our (mother’s / creator’s / mistress’) command.” “We do
not (fear / care for / cower from) sunlight!”

“Really?” Orel grinned. “Well, you should.”

He dropped his sword, lifting his right hand towards the creature. His entire form glowed hot white now, incandescent. He burned with the light of day as he felt invisible wings stretch out from his back, as he felt flesh and blood turn into fire and brilliance. The walls around him melted into liquid, then gas, and then a thousand infernal mouths cried in pain and surprise.

Sunlight. That was all his power amounted to. He hadn’t lied.

But it wasn’t the tired wittered old light that fell down on the fields in the summer. His was the light of the sun at its youngest, as if straight from the source. For an instant, the tunnels around him burned hot enough to not only melt iron into vapor, but to transmute ordinary vapor into gaseous iron just as well.

It was a tiny sun, and a brief one, small enough that Orel didn’t have to worry about hurting anyone besides the creature right in front of him. Even Marco and Jackie, which he could vaguely sense a few miles ahead, would be fine. At most, they would feel a short wave of heat.

It was but the heartbeat of a hummingbird, and the swarm, the mightiest of Midnight’s living spells, was no more.

Orel had been wrong. He had thought he didn’t want to end his fight, because the fight itself would be more satisfying that the death of his enemy. But now that he had experienced both, he realized that the moment of killing had been as sweet to him as nectar. The most delicious sensation he’d ever felt, since he was formed out of the matter of stars.

Perhaps it ought to have given him pause, that he found murder lovely. He hadn’t felt joy when destroying Midnight’s other spells, or her ruman servants, only regret, sometimes tinged with relief. But the creature before him had been shaped in the image of a cackle of demons. It was a just act to kill demons, and a necessary one. One to which Orel was drawn to by his very nature. It was one of the fundamental purposes that heavenly emissaries, such as himself, had been made to fulfill.

As the walls of the tunnel slowly cooled down back into solid matter around him, Orel smiled, contented. It wasn’t a nice or warm smile, and yet, it was angelic… by definition.

----

“The loss of the lunar colony and the fallout from the following meteor showers decimated the world. Civilization collapsed. History laid forgotten. Bases like this one, which would have normally been protected from the meteors, were… rendered sterile of life by the entity,” the mind continued the story. “It did not seem to care at all for constructed minds, one way or the other. Still, given the collapse of the Qur Don Alliance as a whole, and the millennia that have gone on since then, it is safe to assume no other minds remain operational.”

“Is there, to your knowledge, any weapon that could have been used against the entity?” asked Jackie.

Marco was in awe of her presence of mind. It was amazing that, in a moment like this, Jackie could still think of what to ask, what to say, what would be useful for them to know… all he could think about were the ships, and the moon, and the storm of falling rocks.

“No,” the mind replied, simply.
“Alright,” she answered, unfazed. “How long ago did the confrontation happen?”

“Two thousand sixty-one years, seven months, twenty-two days, and eighteen hours ago,” the mind replied.

The hologram had stopped playing, but Marco still saw the rocks falling in his mind.

“Would you have been able to sense any other dimensional portal opening during that time?” Jackie asked. “Was there any such portal between two thousand years and, let’s say, fourteen years ago?”

“Yes and yes, there was a…” the mind stopped. “One moment. I am detecting an unexpected electromagnetic spike within the base. Engaging countermea…”

The calm methodical voice cut off all of a sudden, and the room went dark. Suddenly, Marco couldn’t see Jackie anymore, or the room walls, let alone the floating head of the ‘mind’. The translucent giant bust of orange light had vanished without a trace, as had every other source of illumination.

The glowing red lightning strips around the room, as well as those in the entrance corridor, were gone. They were left in total darkness. Marco felt the room get really hot as well, almost instantaneously. Had it been air conditioned or something before? Had that system just been turned off along with everything else? No, he didn’t think so, he had felt no airflow in here earlier, artificial or otherwise. Besides, the rise in temperature was too sudden for that.

Before he could even react, there was a swishing sound, and suddenly he could see again. He could see Jackie frown, as she held up the torch she had just lit against the floor.

“Marco, any idea what just happened?” she asked.

He shook his head, speechless.

Jackie sighed. “It said something about an electromagnetic spike.”

“Electro… magnetic? Um, isn’t an EM blast and a heat wave part of the effects of a…” Marco began, incredulous about his own words.

“Nuclear explosion? Yeah,” Jackie confirmed. “Maybe this place had a reactor and it malfunctioned? Or it got destroyed? Must have been far away, though, if we are still alive.”

“Um, Jackie, what about radiation then?” Marco had heard of radiation poisoning, but had never thought he would be at risk of experiencing it, particularly not in freaking Qur Don of all places!

She shrugged. “No idea. Maybe, if we start puking our guts later, Orel can do something about it. Maybe not…” she trailed off, non-reassuringly.

Marco smiled weakly, slowly feeling more and more like himself. “I’d say things were simpler when all we had to contend with were lances and arrows and fire breathing unicorns. But well, not really, they weren’t.”

Jackie rolled her eyes, but returned the smile.

Somehow, the shock of potentially having been caught inside a nuclear blast seemed to be countering the shock of seeing the world he had known before die a horrifying death as the sky fell upon it. As for Hekapoo messing with this world’s past, well, he wasn’t sure yet if he was mad, but
he wasn’t surprised.

“Now what, though?” he asked.

“Now we have twenty minutes to both figure out if there is anything worth taking from this technological cave of wonders and get out of the tunnels, before our light runs out,” Jackie reasoned.

Right. Easier said than done, though. They had no idea by now where the exit was and, in terms of taking something… was there anything useful left after the blast? Would they even be able to recognize it?

“How about Orel?” Marco asked, worried. “If there was an explosion, shouldn’t we be making sure he is ok?”

He regretted it immediately. Jackie’s expression just twitched. He obviously didn’t need to remind her of that.

“We’ll wait for him at the backup meeting point,” she said, somewhat harshly. “We don’t have the time to search for him. I’ll just… we’ll just have to trust he is alright.”

Having had his fill of asking dumb questions, Marco helped Jackie examine the room instead. There were glass pieces mounted in the walls and floor, ceiling too. Probably part of the mechanism used to project the holograms. But it was unlikely the ‘mind’ itself, its intelligence, its knowledge, was stored there. Hell, it was probably not even in the same room. And even if it was, would the two untrained humans recognize the pieces of an alien supercomputer?

There also didn’t seem to be any weapons. None they could figure out. Plus, even if there were, those huge spaceship mounted guns hadn’t worked against Midnight. So what hope did they have with anything they could carry with them? Jackie’s glass sword was probably still the best weapon they could hope to get.

“Jackie, let’s go,” Marco said, eventually. Judging by the remains of the torch, they had spent between five and ten minutes searching. “We got what we wanted, actually. We know what happened, how Midnight came here. That’s something! That thing, it was… it was made of fire, wasn’t it?”

Jackie nodded. “Yeah.”

“It was Wish,” Marco said. A strange hope growing in his heart despite the terrifying implications. “That means… well, it means Midnight isn’t Star!”

“Oh, Marco, sweet adorable Marco… I wouldn’t put it quite like that,” sang a familiar voice behind them.

Marco and Jackie turned around to see, half-illuminated by the light of the torch, a frail female form leaning against the walls of the entrance hallway. Eyes closed, hand wrapped around a stone handle ending in a hollow circle. No flame or star in the middle of it. For now.

As Silence stepped into the room, walking slowly towards them, a small ball of fire began reforming within the wand. It started dimmer than even Jackie’s torch, but second by second it grew, until the entire room became illuminated in the bright violet glow of the fake magic wand.

Jackie drew the glass blade. Her eyes narrowed and she charged at the other girl.
A ball of flame shot towards her, and the human girl cut it in two in mid air with her invincible sword, only to be knocked back to the floor by a fist of rainbow colored light flying close behind the first spell. Silence smirked.

“So, you guys think it isn’t me? Really?” Midnight spoke, pouting with a face that wasn’t her own. “That’s what this is about? Is that why you don’t trust me when I say I fixed it?”

“Drop the act!” Marco shouted angrily. “You are not Star!”

The rainbow fist had been a twisted touch, but it wasn’t fooling anyone. Midnight had arrived at this world two thousand years ago, even with the difference in the flow of time there was no chance that Star had been here since then! It had been at most an hour on the outside, about one hundred years inside. Hopefully much less than that, but…

“You are that thing that came through the portal,” he accused. His hands began the gestures of the exorcism ritual, almost by reflex. “You are Wish, or an aspect of Wish, or whatever the fuck magical mishap has been messing with us ever since Star’s song day!”

“A little of column A, and a little of column B, actually,” replied the puppeteered girl, mysteriously. “Look, Marco, I am sorry. I’ll figure out how to explain things correctly. It’s all really confusing, I know, but I am sure you two will understand… just, right now, I need to take you with me. I guess… I guess you two really aren’t coming willingly…”

She pointed the stone wand at Marco. Whatever spell was coming next, it would be over before Marco could even finish the ritual.

“Sleep,” commanded Star’s voice, as a shadowy stream burst out of the violet spinning fireball in the center of the wand.

It hit the wall behind him, way off from where Marco was.

He blinked. Surprised that Midnight had missed at point blank. Then he saw the strings.

Thin, like silken threads of a spider web. They held not only Silence’s arm, pulling it aside from her target, but also her legs, her torso, her neck. The strands clung all around her, tight enough to make her flesh pull inwards like a tied sausage. She tried to speak, but the bindings kept her throat closed.

There were separate strands, coming from various points above them, holding each of the girl’s individual fingers. And then, Marco noticed, separate threads holding the wand, carefully avoiding its burning center. They kept the stone shape suspended in mid air, separated by the smallest of margins from the fingers the other threads had forced open. It was the narrowest of gaps, but, right now, Silence and the fake wand were not touching each other. That almost invisible span of empty air was the gulf between overwhelming power and stark vulnerability.

“Now or never, Jackie!” shouted a vaguely familiar voice.

While Marco was still trying to figure out what was going on, Jackie was already back on her feet, charging again. She pulled the sword back, then forwards, right into the chest of the helplessly bound body before her.

Marco felt frozen in place.

Silence opened her eyes. And in that moment, he knew she was still alive, however briefly. That she had been alive all the days in which Midnight had walked around wearing her flesh. Those
were her eyes. The eyes of a scared traumatized mute girl, about to die.

The spider-silk threads let go. They fell to the ground slack and feeble.

Silence mouthed something, but once again she couldn’t speak, and not only because of the glass blade piercing her heart. Her lips had only been able to speak when it was Midnight speaking through her. Now that they were her own again, her voice was gone once more.

Something large and shadowy dripped from the ceiling, right beside Marco, an inchoate black mess, like a huge splash of coagulated blood, the size of a grown man, or woman.

The viscous shadowy substance coalesced into the body of an old lady. Wrinkled olive skin, unkempt white hair, yellowed teeth, a long flowing black tattered cloak, thick black serpentine lines tattooed around her face, and a terrifying spark in her brown eyes.

“What did she say?” asked the old crone, again in that vaguely familiar voice. “Her lips. Did you see them move?”

If Marco’s brain hadn’t been running behind, still absorbing the last two minutes of action, he would have immediately realized who the hag was, despite her vastly aged up appearance.

“She said…” Jackie replied, turning back to face the non-stranger. “She said ‘thank you’.”

“Good,” the old woman said. “It’s ok. You did the right thing.”

Jackie didn’t respond, didn’t even nod or shake her head. Instead, her face was inescrutable in its neutrality. Marco wondered… the knight captain… in all the years she flew and fought… had she ever killed another person? Not one of the living spells, not hit a priest of Midnight by mistake, not simply been too late to save someone, but actually cut down an innocent ruman out of necessity, knowing full well what she was doing. Marco concluded that she probably had.

After a moment, the cloaked crone added, “Sorry for using you two as bait, by the way. That was probably a bit cold, even for me. Necessary, though.”

Then it finally clicked.

“Janna!?” Marco asked.

“Heh. Marco Diaz, quick as ever, I see,” Janna chuckled.

“H… how long have you been here?” Jackie asked. It seemed painful, the effort to come back from wherever her mind had drifted to, to focus again on the matter at hand.

Janna, if it was really Janna, just walked past them, towards Silence’s body. Somehow, in the last few moments, the mute girl’s eyes had closed again, this time for good.

“Here? You’ll have to be more specific,” their old friend pointed out. “This room? These tunnels? This dimension?”

As she spoke, she picked up the stone wand with her right hand. Marco saw there were also thick black lines tattooed on the back of it, crossing each other. The snake tattoo. There and on her face.

Jackie did not answer her question.

“Never mind,” Janna said simply. “Let’s get out of here. We can do this whole heartfelt reunion bullshit after. Obviously you two missed me about as much as I missed you,” she added,
“Janna, last time we saw each other, you tried to kill me!” Marco protested.

“Nah. Not really.” She waved the accusation away with her left hand. On its wrinkled skin, the tail of the snake tattoo, much larger than Marco remembered, coiled first around her ring finger, then twice around the back of her palm. “I was actually trying to kill Star, you just got in the way. But, yeah, sorry, I could have handled that one a bit better back then. That said, by the way… I don’t like to say ‘I told you so’, but, obviously: I told you so.”

“Told us what?” Jackie asked. Marco noticed that she was keeping the glass blade unsheathed.

“That we should have ditched Star before she got us all killed?” Janna pointed out, as if it were obvious. “A fucking mercy it’d have been if I had managed to strangle her back then...”

“You didn’t, right?” Marco asked. “Star is alive?”

The older woman looked at him like he had just said the dumbest thing imaginable, then nodded towards the dead girl on the floor.

“No, I mean,” Marco said. “That person right now. It wasn’t Star. Was it? It was Wish. It was the same ghosts as before. Just impersonating her instead of Toffee or her mom this time around. It wasn’t Star.”

Frankly, he wasn’t sure if that’s what he believed, or just what he wished he believed...

“Like she said,” Janna sighed, still looking at Silence’s corpse. “It’s complicated.”

There was a brief pause. She tapped two bony fingers on the edge of the stone disc of the wand she was now holding. The sphere of violet fire flickered angrily within it, but nothing else happened.

“At least I got something useful out of this meeting,” she grumbled. “Not something entirely superfluous like gratitude for saving your asses, or even my best friend since elementary school giving a damn that I am alive…” she added.

“Ok, Janna, thanks for saving us, and we are glad you are alive, of course,” Jackie conceded. Marco nodded, somewhat unconvinced. “But we do need to know what happened to Star. It might be the key to fixing this world!”

“A tall order,” Janna muttered. “Look, this world is fucked. I am fucked. You two? Just slightly less fucked. Star? Hell, I can’t believe I was actually jealous of her! Fucked doesn’t even cover it... I don’t have a plan to fix any of that, by the way. But I have a plan to keep Earth from being fucked too, before I die, and you two just played your one and only part in it.”

She caressed the wand, then shrugged.

“Alright, sure, whatever, I’ll tell you,” she added. “But let’s do the whole bit while we get the hell out of here, before anything else shows up.”

Chapter End Notes

Janna is back! Rejoice!
And she has answers about Star and Midnight!

Oh boy does she have answers…

**Coming up next:** Chapter 40: Wish Upon a Falling Star

(You have no idea how long I have waited to drop that title ;))
Chapter 40: Wish Upon A Falling Star

“Look, Jackie, I am not sure I am on the same page. Looks like we don’t even know what the page is. But we have time for figuring this out, right?”

Wrong!

Star saw Jackie leap towards the transforming creature of ghostly fire. She was carrying the glass blade, proclaiming how this, all of this, wasn’t Star’s fault. But, even if Star had been able to believe that lie, there was no way to deny the blame for what was about to happen next.

“Word of advice, girl: hit first, deliver the speech second.”

Toffee’s tail, made of burning emerald flames, spun around before Jackie could react, before Star could warn her. It hit her left cheek. Skin withered away, flesh sizzled and burned. And it was not just the heat, but the impact as well; the human girl’s entire body spun in midair, thrown around like a rag doll in a thunderstorm. It fell on the silver stairs with a painful thud and slid upwards scraping its unmoving limbs along the metal steps.

There was a nasty snapping sound. Jackie’s neck? No. Please. No. Let it be something else.

It was Star’s fault. She had taken her eyes off from Wish. Its words had managed to rattle her, to shock her. It had been the final confirmation of something she had already come to suspect: that she had been the cause of her own mother’s death.

That distraction had allowed the viridescent ghost to break free of its restraints. Star had let herself wallow in self-pity, she had left her friends in harms’ way, again… and she was still doing just that!

She snapped out of it.


“To see my HATED FOE DEVoured!”

The deadly spell hit the ghost’s arm. Star felt the power of her dark magics corroding the insubstantial substance of her enemy, destroying that which should have been indestructible, killing that which must be killed.

There was a speech, but Star didn’t register it. Toffee’s ghost pleaded, and threatened, and cried. Finally, with resignation, it grinned at her. It pointed a finger at something… at someone…

Janna!
An instant, and the witch girl was there, sitting on the steps, right in the path of Star’s partially redirected spell, in the path of pure hatred, of will made death made glowing magical darkness.

An instant, and Wish’s aspect broke down, howling, exploding into a shower of harmless green sparks.

An instant, and Tom jumped, acting on instinct, pushing Janna away from the beam of the spell.

An instant, and he had two arms.

An instant, and it was one.

Blood. So much of it. Red eyes. A cry of pain that lasted until there was no more air inside his lungs to fuel it. Guilt as deep as the sea, as familiar as a childhood blanket.

She ran towards him, knelt down beside him.

“Tom, calm down, it’s ok, it’s ok!” A lie. Anything to stop those screams like rending talons on her battered conscience.

“Get away from him!” someone cried beside them.

“Janna? Oh god... I am so sorry...”

The response to her apology was deadly blue lightning, flowing out of the witch’s stretched hand. Star blocked the assaulting spell with her glittering bubble barrier.

“What the hell, Janna!?” she cried, surprised.

That seemed to only make the other girl even angrier. And, for the few strikes that followed - a spear of inky blackness, a rain of arrows - Star wasn’t sure she could bring herself to blame her. A part of the princess couldn’t yet understand that her friend, her hijinks pal, Janna Banana, was trying to kill her. Another could, and wondered whether she would do the same in her place.

“Janna, please, calm down, what are you doing?”

“Saving us all from the Dark Queen Ascending!”

Even as the hissing ghostly tendrils wrapped around her limbs and neck, the mewnman’s heart wasn’t fully in defending herself. She glanced at Tom’s curled up yelling form, his one remaining hand cradling the stump where the other arm should be. Maybe Janna had the right idea after all? Would Wish - the full Wish, all of its far aspects - also die, if Star did?

“Ky-aah!” Marco shouted, cutting off the ribbons. His strange ritual magic allowing him to interact with the otherwise intangible portion of the restraints. “Janna, that’s enough! Look, I know you are in shock, but you need to back the hell off!”

“Make me.”

And then, Janna threw Marco down the side of the silver stairs, and all sympathy the princess had for the other girl’s position was gone forever.

Star broke her restraints. She fired a blast of destruction at Janna. The witch blocked.

Time. She still had time.
Star closed her eyes and began to change.

Time to rescue Marco, to fly down and grab him before he fell into the hellish ocean below and towards a certain death. Her wings sprouted out from her back, her limbs multiplied, her eyes glowed. Indescribable power coursed through her, far too large for any mewman-sized vessel, yet somehow at ease within hers.

Janna’s hand crushed her windpipe, and dragged her flying backwards, past Jackie’s fallen body. Unearthly power coursed through the black-haired girl as well. *Sam’s* unearthly power.

Before she realized what was going on, Star was seeing the scene before her through a swirling orange and gold vortex: the silver stairs; the dark void below, Marco somewhere unseen within it; Tom, cradling his arm and whimpering, his throat perhaps too exhausted to keep shrieking; Jackie’s limp form, broken. It all twisted and jumbled together before fading out, as Janna pushed Star through the dimensional portal.

They emerged into a huge exuberant forest, full of enormous trees and sunflowers nearly as tall. They emerged through a stone arc, no portal visible from this end. No way back.

No! There had to be a way back. There could not not be one! Star had to go back. She had to help Marco! But, first of all… she had to get Janna off of her!

The mewman princess’ eyes glowed sharp violet and a wave of force exploded out from her. She wanted Janna gone, she wanted all of this gone, she had things to do. The hand on her throat let go, as the witch was pushed back through the stone circle - now portal-free - and up into the grey skies of this dimension. All around, sunflowers caught in the blast burned and withered instantly, trees exploded into clouds of splinters. The entrance ring had been almost buried within the living mass of the forest when they arrived, but it now lay surrounded by a wide disk of barren earth and burning ashes instead. Within that disk, the blast had revealed too a ring of ancient rune-etched monoliths, once hidden by the vegetation.

Unfortunately, even that wasn’t enough for Janna to truly let Star go. Where her grip had faltered, her anger had not.

The witch dived down from above, raining lightning and shadowy spears of inchoate blackness onto the object of her fury. Star flew up to confront her, a fast bolt of black and gold in her transformed form, beams of burning energy flowing from each of her five outstretched hands, and from the center of the true burning star inside her spiked steel wand.

They chased one another through the clouds with deadly intent. Each of them avoiding the other’s magics, trying to catch their opposite unaware in return. Star would have been surprised at how much raw magical force Janna could wield right then, if she weren’t so focused on getting rid of her as soon as possible. She had to go back and help Marco!

She didn’t even notice the black line of the snake tattoo coiling around the full length of the human’s arm as they fought, climbing through her shoulder, diving into the space between the witch’s fleshy wings.

But she did see the wings: membranous, skin-colored, and bat-like in their appearance. One whole, and one battered from scraping against the silver stairs. That was the key, she realized. If Star could pluck out her wings, she could ground Janna, if only for a moment. Then she could fly away, figure out a way back, make her own portal if need be. She just needed an instant alone to try, before it was too late.
Hell, maybe she could get rid of Janna’s wings forever. It’s not like she had them naturally, after all. Yes, that was it! That would let her get away from the human girl, without having to kill her friend…

“I call the darkness unto me…” she intoned, as fast as she could.

A fireball the size of Marco’s house hit her right as she started the spell. It enveloped her completely, singeing her clothes, burning away the rose and heart motif embroidered in the middle of the chest, sending her spinning through the air. Her skin felt… mildly warm.

Janna had no idea who she was messing with!

“Fine,” she cried out to the other teen. “You started this, Janna Banana. I am sorry, I really am, but I need to go find Marco, I… I am sorry.”

Janna’s power might be Sam’s power, but she was but a pale echo of the devil of marble and blue flame. Star could end this in an instant if she had to, and, well, she did.

The mewman didn’t so much dip down as plunged. She went into herself, into that dark place beneath places she had sought before her resurrection. The place that was made of hate and love in equal measure. Love for Marco. Hate for… for her former friend.

‘I call the darkness within me,’ she thought. ‘From deepest depths I set you free.’

She didn’t need more than that. This wasn’t Sam, this wasn’t Wish, this was just an angry confused girl who had seen her crush, the guy she loved - whether she admitted it or not - get seriously hurt. Star could sympathize. She could regret what Janna was forcing her to do. What she didn’t have the time for was hesitation, or self-pity. No, those would have to wait until Marco was safe!

What little light remained in that gray overcast sky faded. The greenery below turned pale white, bone white, limestone white. The trees, the endless forest underneath them, turned to stone in an instant. Janna stopped in mid air, right in front of Star, eyes wide, hands clutching her own throat, as Star’s magics literally drained the life from her.

The mewman looked at her friend in the eyes. She had thought she would feel awful. It was murder, after all, on her close friend and classmate of nearly a year. But she only felt impatient. She needed this to be over. She needed to go back to Marco. And to Jackie too.

Focused as she was, this time Star noticed the snake slithering. It climbed onto the right shoulder and through the witch’s upper arm. The black tattoo, unaffected by the mewman’s death spell, bit into Janna’s elbow, on the opposite arm from where it had started. The human girl’s body seemed to melt under the bite.

It dissolved into black ichor. It dripped towards the ground, like a bucket of rotting blood turned upside down.

Janna had found a way to escape. Star didn’t mind. She preferred that, even… as long as she had time alone now.

She pushed together four of her six arms and tried, with all her might, to pry apart the fabric between dimensions. She knew, instinctively, that she could. That was why, back in Sam’s palace, she had offered the other teens a ticket back to Earth, if they only had chosen - sensibly, it would turn out - not to follow her for the rest of her quest. They had declined, but still, she could do this. She knew she could. She had to.
A small sickly green vortex formed between her hands for an instant, before popping away like a soap bubble just a second after.

She tried again.

Pop.

Six arms, all her power.

Pop.

The wand.

Pop.

Star tried and tried to open a portal, again and again. She dipped down, and cursed, and promised her heart and soul to whichever power would open a portal back to hell for her. She yelled for Sam. She recited spells, dark first and then darker. And yet the portals would not come.

Not when she begged, nor when she cried.

Not after the sun had set, nor after it rose again.

----

She wandered deserts and climbed mountains, flew over huge craters and even grander seas. Days and nights blended together in Star Butterfly’s mind, and not one passed without another attempt at a portal. Every time, her powers failed her. Every time, she found herself unable to leave this useless broken dimension behind, to go back to save him.

She soon became aware of the people of this world, of their strange religion, and the brown robed monks who claimed to serve a suffering goddess. Some, when they saw her - winged and many-armed, dressed in gold and black, wearing a golden horned diadem, carrying the sun inside an iron scepter - took Star for a divine emissary, an agent of their strange deity. The mewman paid them no mind. It took her seconds to realize that none of those people knew much about magic or dimensional travel. They would be of no help to her. They were… inconsequential.

Marco was still alive. She knew it. Not out of blind hope, but out of cold hard logic.

Star had remembered the first time she came here, to rescue Marco from Hekapoo’s clutches. She remembered not recognizing him, she remembered his grown up muscular appearance - on cold lonely nights, oh how she remembered! - she remembered, in conclusion, that time moved more slowly in this place than it did on Earth and Mewni. It likely also ran slow compared to the hell dimension with the silver stairs.

Marco hadn’t fallen to his death. He was falling. She could still catch him, if she were there with him.

But still, she could not reach him.

Star had been in this place for about a month. Hard to tell for certain, of course, without a moon. Wasn’t there one last time? It didn’t matter, it was not like she needed to be precise in her count, not yet. About a month for her. Half a second or so for him.

She had remained in her butterfly form the entire time. Not only because Janna was probably still
out there somewhere, but mostly because she felt her own powers grow stronger the longer she remained transformed. Quickly at first, during battle. Now much more slowly. Still, day by day they deepened. More power meant a higher chance that her next attempt would work, that she would eventually be strong enough to do it.

Star flew high over the raging waves of the turbulent ocean below, land but a distant memory in every cardinal direction. She remained below the clouds for now, the storm that howled around her bothered her little. She could barely feel the occasional thunderstrike on her wings, rain and wind had long become immaterial to her.

She tried to create a portal, once more.

‘Pop’ it went. She wasn’t yet strong enough…

She felt tired. Not physically, of course, but mentally. She hadn’t actually needed to sleep since she first arrived to this dimension. Her butterfly form didn’t need sleep. Food and water had become very much optional as well and, in time, discarded as outdated habits. Maybe her tiredness was just a memory now? Some obsolete part of her mind telling her she needed rest, long after that had stopped being true?

She sometimes wondered if this form, sustained for so long, affected her mind as well as her body. She concluded, somewhat obviously, that until she found a way to save Marco, she didn’t really care. She wasn’t *allowed* to care.

There were things that definitely hadn’t changed, though. She loved him. She missed him, and she missed Jackie. She felt guilty about Tom. She hated Janna, almost as much as she hated herself.

Whatever the monks thought of her, for a divine being, Star Butterfly cried a lot.

She made another attempt, and got another useless ‘pop’ for her efforts.

If only… if only she could see Marco again.

She *needed* to see him again.

There was a way, of course, but she didn’t dare. Not after everything that had happened. So she didn’t say the words. But she thought them, and now a days that was almost the same, ‘I summon the all-seeing eye…’

That was all it took. The clouds above her shifted and parted. They opened first into a slit like the eye of a snake, then into a wide circular ring, dark storm clouds rolling around the enormous opening. Through it, she saw Marco.

Her desperation to look at him overpowered even her fear of the spell. Instead of dismissing it or running away, Star just stared upwards, transfixed.

Marco’s face was rendered huge in the massive vision above her, his pursed lips wider than the span of her wings. Star realized she was seeing him from below. He was falling towards her. He looked terrified as he fell.

She flew up to catch him, despite him being a hundred times her size in the abnormally upscaled vision above. Even if he really were a giant, Star knew, she could carry him, easily. But she also knew she couldn’t really reach him. Instead, she hit the invisible elastic surface of the All-Seeing Eye spell. She pushed lightly against it, and then softly let herself fly down again. She knew what would happen if she pressed further. The spell would break on her, and she would end up reaching,
not Marco, but the night sky above the clouds.

Instead, she watched. She let herself take in the boy’s face. At first, she could only see his terror. His eyes were closed, his mouth forcefully shut, his fists clenched as he prepared for impact. It nearly broke Star.

But she kept looking. Minutes turned to hours and her attention started to wander to the boy’s tousled hair, to his adorable perky nose, to the trademark beauty mark on his right cheek. Star would do anything to prevent him from falling to his death, anything to save him, anything to ensure he was alright.

“Anything?” she heard a voice among the clouds. It sounded a bit like her own voice, but larger, amplified. For a second, she mistook it for her own thoughts. But only for a second.

“Who is there!?” she asked the storm around her.

“Hope,” the voice answered.

The mewman’s eyes narrowed. She growled, “You!”

Beams of death and destruction emerged from each of the princess’ five free hands and from the center of the magic wand held on the sixth. She fired again and again, in every direction, hoping to catch Wish - whatever aspect of the foul being was around - by surprise. Her spells hit the surface of the ocean, and huge clouds of steam exploded up from the boiling patches of water. They hit the clouds and they parted away, showing the red gash of stars in the night sky. They hit her scrying viewport, and the picture of Marco burst away.

“Please, Star,” the voice added calmly. “We can help you save him. We can help you make things right. We can help you get him back… if only you’d let us.”

“Oh no, not this time! No, no, no, no, a million times no!” Star shouted.

The response came quieter this time, as if from far away, moving farther as it spoke.

“Then we shall ask… a million and one.”

----

After that night over the ocean, Star swore, not for the first time, never to use the seeing-eye spell again. She kept that promise for barely a week. She would not have lasted much longer without seeing Marco’s face. His and Jackie’s. But, with them, she endured. Perhaps it would have been better if she had not.

A month turned into a year, and that one into two, barely recorded in the minute differences between the seasons of this dying world. Over time, Star’s attempts at making a true dimensional portal became fewer and fewer, while the hours in front of the viewport of the scrying spell came to occupy the greater part of her existence.

“I summon the All-Seeing Eye,” she muttered, as she sat, still transformed, ever transformed, atop the tall peak of a mountain. She had pushed her wings into it, carving herself a seat in her own shape, as if the ancient rock were nothing but molding clay. An opaque mist surrounded her, an endless turquoise-tinted white fog as far as her eyes could see.

The scrying portal formed at once, without waiting for her to complete the verse, the two of them were no longer in such formal terms. She saw Marco falling, this time from the side and in normal
size. It was the most common angle these days. She could see the water below him now, closer, ever closer.

“He falls fast now,” her own voice reminded her. “In a second or so he’ll hit the water. Two months for you, perhaps less.”

“Fuck off.” Star replied by reflex, without conviction.

She had become used to the disembodied voice. She didn’t know if it came to her through the spell itself, or if it simply had decided to only talk to her when she was using it. That is, when she was seeing her friends, when she was at her most vulnerable, at her most susceptible to its endless pestering. All she knew for sure was that the voice traveled alone, there was never a body nearby for her to inflict her rage upon, much as she itched for at least that satisfaction.

“He’ll die when he does. On impact if he is lucky. Otherwise, he will be devoured alive by the bacteria in there in a matter of minutes,” the voice noted.

“So you say,” Star retorted. She had nearly memorized this conversation by now.

“We can’t lie. And, remember, minutes there will be years in here. Do you really want to witness that play out in slow motion? See him slowly rot and bleed, wriggling in pain so slowly you don’t see him move, until somewhere down the line you are left staring at a fleshless corpse?”

Star’s stomach twisted and tumbled at the idea, never mind that it had been empty for two years.

“We can help,” the voice prodded.

“No,” she answered, as per their familiar script.

“No you don’t want to see that? Or no you don’t want our help? Or perhaps you do not believe we can help?”

She didn’t dignify that with a response.

The mewman had found out, somewhere after the first few months, that she could indeed open dimensional portals. But those could only lead her to other parts of Hekapoo’s former domain. The world she was in now, with its rolling blue-tinted mists and huge mountains over bottomless depths, was not the same as that which contained the now dead forest she had first arrived at, and yet, in a sense, it was.

She had come far from where she started, and yet not nearly far enough. Marco, poor terrified Marco, seemed as far away from her reach now as that night over the ocean, two years ago. Could she really figure out a way back in only one or two more months?

With a wave of her hand, Star switched perspectives. Jackie appeared on the other side of the cloud-framed vision. Still unconscious on the silver steps.

Star couldn’t see her breathe. She never could. She wouldn’t be able to, either way. It was impossible to tell whether Jackie was dead or merely unconscious. Time moved too slowly over there, catching her breathing would have been like catching Earth’s continents moving. And, whatever Miss Skullnick said, Star still wasn’t sure that they really did. She had certainly never heard of something like that in Mewni and… God, how she wished she had told Jackie she loved her too!

“We can give you a second chance to do that as well,” the voice pointed out.
Star really hated that it could read her thoughts. When she first caught onto that, she had been irate for days and stopped calling on the spell for just as long, now it was just one more thing she loathed about the voice.

“So, she is alive?” the mewman tried, once again.

“That is irrelevant. We can help either way,” the voice assured her.

It wasn’t the first time Star asked, or the first time it refused to answer. It couldn’t lie, or so it claimed, but it certainly could equivocate and throw half-truths at you all day long.

“Do you not believe we can? Or that we won’t hold our end of the bargain?”

“I believe I will regret it even if you do.” They were past the point of her giving snappy comebacks. The truth was good enough.

“More than you’ll regret them being dead?” the voice prodded.

Star had no answer to that. Neither snappy nor honest.

“Star, let us show you something, just this once,” it pressed on. “We have done this before. Let us convince you of our sincerity. We have made mistakes, it’s true, but, we swear, all we wish is for your heart’s desire to come true…”

The view through the All-Seeing Eye spells changed, and Star didn’t break the spell.

That was, perhaps, her final mistake.

----

The first vision through the spell was that of a beautiful winged man, kneeling down in the middle of an endless room covered with candles. No walls close enough to be seen, no ceiling that light could reach, but the floor was made of pure silver. He opened his mouth and sound burst forth from it, not a voice, not words, but the sound of rolling thunder and the tolling of brass bells.

The familiar snake eye surrounded by black clouds appeared then, inside the vision framed by itself. Star saw through the All-Seeing Eye spell, to the angel in the room of candles, who in turn looked at his own version of the All-Seeing Eye.

Slowly, a figure walked out of the portal inside the vision. It was the same shape as the one kneeling down on the floor: two arms, two legs, two wings, one head. But the head was a mask of silver, and the body was larger, stronger, and made of green flames. It extended an arm towards the angel.

In the portal within portal, another figure could be seen, a third angel - or was it the second? Did the being of fire even count as one? - extending his arms forwards, motioning to the one inside the candles’ room to come closer. The kneeling angel stood up, shook the hand of the creature made of emerald fire, and then walked through the dark clouds of the All-Seeing Eye spell as if it were a doorway, not just a window.

The masked being of fire remained in the room instead, and from every candle the flame became green and flew towards it, joining its body, augmenting it.

The vision changed.
A huge worm. A faceless towering snake with a hundred tentacles coming out from it where a centipede would have feet. A repulsive inhuman creature slithering over a mountain of flesh and bone under a crimson sky. It growled and gashed in terrible sounds that nearly froze the princess’ blood.

It took her a moment to realize it was speaking.

The scrying eye portal opened before it, and the worm seemed to speak into it.

There was a flash of green. Then, from the bone and flesh surrounding the worm, a second such creature was formed, like a doll sewn from a butcher shop’s refuse. The creatures embraced one another and began to mate.

Star was ever so glad that the vision changed shortly after.

She saw many more like that. Strange creatures. Strange places, always the portal, always at least two of a kind, sometimes, rarely, three or more.

“Do you understand what you are seeing?” the voice spoke.

“They are calling to you, and you bring them together with their… their lovers, their mates,” Star pointed out. “You bring them back to life or allow them to cross dimensions or…”

“The mechanism is a metaphor, but the effect is very real,” the voice answered. “And that’s not the only wish we can grant, the only Wish we can be… but we show you the outcomes closest to your own desires.”

Star shook. It was right. It was what she desired, what she desired more than anything in the whole world. But she had made a deal with this thing before, without knowing it, and it had cost her mother’s life. Some bargains were not meant to be made.

“Why do you do it? What do you get in return?” she asked. “What’s in it for you?”

“Everything,” the voice, which was Star’s own voice, answered.

Then the view through the spell changed one more time, and this time it was a familiar shape, and a familiar place.

“There is a final outcome we can show you. We believe it will be particularly familiar to you,” the voice added. “Although it must be clear that this particular example, like the first time you called onto us, did not go according to plan…”

----

The Forest of Certain Death burned, turned into a funerary pyre for the heaps of mewman and monster corpses lying down in its midst. A few figures still stood, engaged in apocalyptic combat; fierce looking mewman warriors with flaming solarian swords fighting terrifying lizard monsters whose limbs grew back just as soon as they were hacked away. A single figure knelt down, besides a fallen giant, ignoring the rest of the carnage around her.

“My queen, my queen!” cried a familiar voice, as a muscular pigtailed girl ran towards the kneeling figure.

To her surprise, Star could not help but note that it would have been trivial for her to end such battle. A second would have been enough. That is, of course, assuming this were happening now and not - presumably - four hundred years earlier, and that Star herself was there. Still, she had come so far in power. So why wasn’t it enough to save Marco?

The kneeling figure turned around, lifting her eyes from the huge red furry monster before her. She was crying. Star recognized her too: Eclipsa. Strangely, she seemed older than she had been when Star herself met her at her mom’s funeral, and she had the wand. In the hands of the Queen of Darkness, it was an umbrella.

“We need you, my queen!” Mina cried out to her. “You must help us destroy these foul monsters! Victory is so close at hand, but your subjects need you!”

“My… subjects?” Eclipsa asked, vacantly. There was something sharp and poisoned in her glare, as she finally looked up at Mina. “My subjects? My subjects did this!”

“Yes, my queen, we did! Isn’t it great?” Mina exclaimed, clearly missing the tone entirely. “But we can’t finish it all alone. We need you, my queen. To complete your momma’s legacy…”

“My mother’s legacy of murder, you mean!?” Eclipsa yelled.

The other mewman seemed taken aback by this. Around them, the battle raged on.

“He is dead. He didn’t do anything to you, you know?” Eclipsa spoke, not to Mina, really, just in her general direction. “He was a vegetarian, damn it! For fifteen years!”

“He tried to kidnap you, my queen… again.” Mina seemed uncertain.

“No, he did not,” Eclipsa retorted. “I ran away, you idiots! I was deserting! I was fleeing this stupid war and now… and now all I have left to do is to flee again… to flee farther away than I ever have. I’ll flee to some place where he is still alive. Where he and I shall both live together, for four hundred years! Away from you and my kingdom! That’s my deepest heart’s desire, and nothing else!”

She paused, then, with unconcealed disgust, the kind that builds up for years, behind the veil of necessary politeness, she added, “…although I’ll admit I’d also be quite glad if all of you didn’t exist in that reality, you horrible horrible girl.”

Eclipsa stood up. She raised her wand.

“I summon the all seeing eye, to tear a hole into the sky!”

No monster or mewman dared stop her.

“Reveal to me that which is hidden. Unveil to me what is forbidden!”

The clouds appeared, then the snake eye, then the portal. The red monster was behind it, alive, smiling. So was Eclipsa herself. They were holding hands.

“I call the watcher, all coveting, hopes fulfilling, wants begetting!”

Uh, Star had never heard that verse! It wasn’t in the book of spells, that’s for sure.

“I pledge my soul to unearthly fire, to obtain my deepest heart’s desire!”

The All-Seeing Eye viewpoint changed then so that, at that moment, Eclipsa was looking directly
towards Star. It was as if the older woman’s version of the spell and the girl’s version of the spell had been aligned at the edges, with each of them merely on a different side of the same cloud-framed opening.

There was a flash of light, a burst of emerald flames coming from everywhere at once, and all around Eclipsa the vision dissolved. A fiery implosion rather than an explosion, the edges blurring first, then the background. The foreground’s near periphery came last: Globgor’s body, Mina Loveberry…

It all came crashing down towards front and the middle, towards the former queen of Mewni.

But the flames never reached her. Instead, the image froze right there, a second before the fire consumed her too, showing the Queen of Darkness, still determined, still pointing the wand towards Star’s side of the portal.

----

“That’s all we can show you, I am afraid,” the voice apologized. “There is nothing left in that timeline after that moment.”

Well, Eclipsa had warned her it wasn’t just a scrying spell. No kidding! Couldn’t she have been a little more specific? ‘Hey, deary, that spell can rewrite history, and bring the dead back to life, and, by the way, it has a mind of its own and that mind is a damn asshole.’ But no, of course she couldn’t have said that. That would have actually been helpful.

“So, did she get what she asked for?” Star asked, finally.

“Yes,” the voice that supposedly couldn’t lie responded. “She got a second chance, a world where her monster lover, Globgor, was alive, and where they got to stay together for four hundred years, away from the mewmans and monsters who would pull them apart.”

“Four hundred years… frozen together inside Rhombulus’ crystals,” Star concluded.

“Yes,” the voice responded. “As we said, that was a… complicated case.”

Talk about being careful what you wish for! But, then again, if Star put herself in Eclipsa’s place: would she rather live imprisoned with Marco forever, or alone and free in a world that didn’t have him? Could Eclipsa even sense the passage of time in there? Did she… “Does she remember that other timeline?”

“Yes.”

“Does the monster… does Globgor, or anyone else remember?”

“No. Her, us, now you, and a few others who can see such changes from without.”

“And that’s what you are offering me, then,” Star reasoned. “A timeline where Marco and Jackie are safe?”

"You see, time is like a river..." the voice began.

"I know. Spare me the lecture." She had heard that one before, and she was not going to let Wish even pretend that he was Glossaryck, that he was a mentor, or a friend.

"Very well," the voice conceded. “The point is that it would take very little effort on our part to
nudge this timeline, just a little bit. Nudge it into one where Jackie is alive, and Marco will be saved. You’d barely notice the difference. Then you can wait for them here, be together again, have a chance at a happy ending for all of you… with our help.”

“And my mom?” Star asked.

“If that’s all that’s holding you back from agreeing…” The voice trailed off, appearing to think. “We can bring her back, you and us, together. It will be a bit harder at this point, but we can fix it. We can fix everything. But you need to stop fighting us, Star.”

You might think the last two years of wandering alone would have been enough for Star to come to terms with that loss, at least, if not all the others. But alas, you’d be wrong. She missed her mom more than ever. Perhaps it was the fact that now, so it seemed, she needed not be gone forever, not if Star was willing to pay the price.

“Will you do it?” asked the voice again. “Will you stop opposing us if we can make it so Marco, Jackie, and even your mom all live? If we can make all of them be with you, happily ever after? Will that be the entirety of your deepest heart's desire? So large that nothing else will matter?”

It would be easy to say that Star didn’t understand the meaning of the bargain, or that she couldn’t think of anything else she had to lose. That she had forgotten Sam’s warning. That she didn’t think of her dad, or Ponyhead, or Kelly, or all her friends and subjects in Mewni. That she didn’t consider Angie and Rafael Diaz, or all her classmates at Echo Creek, or the unfathomable enormity of the population of Marco’s home dimension.

It would also be a lie.

“Will Marco and Jackie be happy? Will my mom?” she asked.

“Yes, eventually,” it qualified. “This is more than even we can do all at once, but if you cooperate, in the end it will be so.”

Back in Sam’s castle, after the devil had killed her, Star had come back wishing to protect the two humans, knowing that she risked fulfilling the prophecy that claimed she would become evil incarnate.

“Can I add more people to that list?” she tried. Let it be said she tried.

“We are afraid not. The task grows complex as it is,” the voice explained. “Where it doesn’t interfere with our plans, however, you may make your own arrangements. No promises there, of course.”

Again, an out. A way for Star to claim she thought she’d be able to go back to Mewni, to Earth, and save everyone. In truth, she knew that was unlikely. Perhaps, if she was lucky, she might be allowed to go back for her dad.

It would be easy to claim that Star Butterfly was conned into selling her soul, or that it was an honest mistake, like her first use of the spell, the true spell, had been, that lonely night back in her room in Marco’s home. It would be easy to claim that she was still innocent and naive, that she didn’t know how much blood would come to be on her hands if she took the deal Wish offered.

It would be easy. It would be comforting. It would be incorrect.

“Marco, Jackie, my mom, myself, all together, all happy? For multiple decades at the least? Aware and not frozen in time or anything like that? That's a guarantee?”
“Yes.”

“Then you are right,” she agreed. “Nothing else matters.”

There was silence as her response, and the picture of Eclipsa through the scrying portal, still holding up the wand. Star understood. She understood perfectly. She merely hesitated.

But not for long.

“I summon the all seeing eye…”

This time, she knew all the verses.

----

She had fixed it. She had fixed everything. She could see, day after day, how Tom’s diving body got closer and closer to Marco’s falling one. She could sense the beating of Jackie’s heart, slow like that of the world, but steady.

Star’s transformed figure descended slowly over a flat cliff. It had been a month since she made her final deal with Wish, and she looked quite the same as before. Only the green flames that trailed in her wake betrayed the growing presence within her.

The inside of her mind was another story. The voice had always been her own voice, but now the distinctions blurred even further, her thoughts, the entity’s thoughts, there was little difference. She had promised, after all, never again to be in opposition to them. Wish wanted what Star wanted. Star wanted what Wish wanted. In this they were one.

The winged girl beheld a huge floating gate, suspended in midair atop the barren mesa. It’s twin doors were decorated with angular images: diamonds and eyes. A solid stone archway framed them. No part of it made contact with the ground below nor with any other material support but, to the eyes of the dark queen ascending, the magics that held it up were as conspicuous as brick walls or marble columns. Perhaps more.

Star’s arms remained lowered to her sides, her lips silent. Her mind did the knocking, an arcane thump just short of a psychic battering ram made the structure tremble. The doors swung open.

“Yes, yes, who is it?” a fey looking blue creature asked, boredly, as he stepped out through the dimensional doorway. He used the mouth upon its face to speak. The larger one, in the middle of his stomach, remained closed shut, wormy lips twitching just under the thin fabric of his gauzy top.

“Are you the creature they call Wyscan the Granter?” confirmed Star, impatiently.

“The very same,” it responded. “And who would you be?”


The creature on the other side of the doorway arched an eyebrow.

“I am… Midnight,” spoke she who had been mewman. “I claim the right of domain over this world. I will abide no powers within it besides my own. You shall serve and worship me, or else be no more.”

The elfin creature glanced up and down the many-armed and many-winged form of Midnight. It was a calculating look, sizing up a potential rival, a newcomer to a turf that had long been his own.
“I refuse,” he replied, a mocking smile on his lips as he raised both hands, in what would otherwise be a conciliatory gesture.

Midnight nodded, gravely, and lifted the wand. “So be it.”

She took aim, and fired.

The shadowy beam flew right past Wyscan, an arm’s length away from his pointed left ear.

“You missed,” the blue man taunted her.

“We did not,” Midnight corrected him, as the spell hit the doorway to the magical being’s little pocket dimension.

Wyscan turned around, just in time to see the open gateway slam shut. The glowing patterns upon the doors dimmed instantly, then all of the remaining color followed them, more slowly, purples and blues first, then even the gray of the stone, until the whole archway turned into an inky-black shadow. Unlike a true shadow, however, there was depth and volume to the dark form.

At first, the effect was not unlike that of a black tombstone floating in the middle of the dim night sky. Soon, however, Star knew, the creature would realize what he was seeing. It was no solid slab of matter, but a three-dimensional hole upon the fabric of this world. An instant after that, the rest of the scenery came pouring in into the void, until no trace remained of there ever having been a doorway there.

His escape route now closed, Midnight took aim again.

The creature jumped up, lifting his shirt up and opening wide the monstrous mouth upon its belly. It swallowed her spell. For a second, nothing happened. Wyscan smiled.

Then there was a howl of pain, coming from the hole in his gut. It opened wide to yell and cry out in agony, and Midnight could see its rapidly crumbling fang-like teeth, its decaying shriveled corpse of a tongue, the putrefying blood pouring from a hundred gashes in the inner lining. The magic eater had consumed a baleful spell, made of hate and fury, and it was him who was now being devoured, inside out.

Driven one part by anger, one part by pity, and a third by disgust, Midnight redoubled her assault. First came a leg. Then another. The left arm, then the right one. Fine dark beams of deadly magic carving her foe, bit by bit, then turning to ash the butchered pieces. The silence of the night tainted by his pig-like screams.

“I… I’ve changed my mind…” it pleaded, struggling to regain enough composure for speech. “I’ll serve, I’ll…”

“Too late,” she declared, as a final beam cut off his head and swerved down to burn his now gruesome torso to ash too, for good measure. “You wouldn’t have been useful to us like that anyways.”

But, the point remained: Midnight did need servants. Something beyond the priesthood that worshiped her. Something to deal with creatures like Wyscan, who thought they could usurp her wish-granting authority, and to remind the people of this world that she existed, that she was there for them, whenever they were ready. That she would answer her prayers, if only they told her what they wished for, if only they revealed to her their deepest heart’s desires. Desires so large that nothing else mattered, so large that she could take whatever she needed in return.
The star within the wand shone bright violet, and from the ground rose a few dozen winged unicorns, their bodies made of bone and iron. Knife sharp horns and skeletal wings grew out of tough armored bodies, shrouded in flames. They knelt down before their creator and let out a long echoing neigh into the black moonless night.

Yes, those would do. At least as a start.

A reminder to all of her power, and of her love… and of the limits of her patience.

----

Years passed, winters came and went, and with them famine upon an already barren world. The newly minted goddess found herself soon acquainted with the wants of her faithful. Hunger in particular was a surprisingly common motivator for prayer.

Midnight had expected to be called forth on matters of love and matters of hate. And, indeed, she often was. She was asked to reunite lovers, to punish deception, even to force desire. She was called forth to avenge deaths, to punish wrongdoing, to satiate greed. She was invoked in matters of war too, when the supplicant’s want was great enough, as often to undo the invader as the invaded. She didn’t judge their causes, their reasons, their petty squabbles. Midnight simply answered their calls and, then, exacted her price. That too, it seemed to her, was a sort of justice.

Still, at least at first, the part of her that was Star had not imagined that, ten times as often as any of that, she would be called forth to provide sustenance. More often and more readily did men trade their future for bread than for love, revenge, or glory.

Curing illness and inborn weakness was another common prayer for her to answer.

The part of her that was Wish had smirked at her naivete. Survival, not fulfillment, was her most popular stock in trade.

But the business at hand this night was not the prolonging of a life, but its return, and that was a matter that interested both of them greatly.

Midnight found the young woman crying by a desert grave, her fingers forming a triangle, a gesture of prayer. The grave was small, far too small for an adult, and the deity intuited the situation at hand in a moment. Still, she asked, kindly, “What’s the matter?”

She could have perused the ruman’s mind, taken her prayer from her thoughts rather than her lips. In fact, for expedience, Midnight often did just that, without even bothering to appear in front of her supplicants. This time, however, she took the slow approach.

The woman turned around. She turned around to see the six-armed woman of diaphanous black wings and golden horns, of green shimmering eyes and tall regal body. Star allowed herself to glance, through the woman’s eyes, at her own twenty-two - perhaps twenty-three - year old self, transformed and now surrounded by a halo of ghostly green flames.

Was the one before her older or younger than herself? Did it even make sense to compare?

In her defense, the other woman did not flinch when she saw her deity, even knowing, as they all knew, the price of a successful prayer. “Please, bring her back, your glory. Please, it’s all I want. Do what you will to me, but, please, bring her back…”

Sam’s words echoed in her mind then. ‘I cannot. It goes beyond my attributions.’ Star, Midnight, smiled. It wasn’t beyond hers.
Still, it wasn’t a trivial request.

“She was young. Her life would have been longer than yours,” she remarked. “Offering yourself is a poor trade.”

The woman was silent for a moment. “My husband, her father. I am sure he feels the same. If I get him to pray with me, will that be enough? Will our lives be enough?”

“Perhaps,” Midnight spoke. “Perhaps not. Who else is there, that would care for you or the child?”

“There are many, your glory,” she replied. “She was born in our best year, many in town celebrated her birth. My husband and I are well loved in the village, he was a soldier and I a healer, many owe us their lives.”

“Do they trust you?” Star found herself asking, at Wish’s insistence.

“Yes, your glory.”

“And would you be willing to betray that trust?”

“For her?” she looked down at the mound in the ground. “...anything.”

It was her deepest heart's desire, and thus, Midnight granted it.

She placed her hand on the dry ground, and a child’s hand rose to meet her. She lifted the eight-year old girl gently from her interment, and cleaned her of all the dirt and magots. She healed her from disease and rot and handed her back into the arms of her mother, who embraced without reservation that which a minute earlier had been a decomposing corpse.

Star used her own living energy to grant that wish. A loan of sorts. She left that same night. She allowed both parent and child sixty days and sixty nights, before she came back to collect. Funny how even the tales of her own priesthood, as they recounted the story, made little emphasis on that bout of generosity…

‘And the deity did listen, and the child did rise, and their heart did beat anew. And in the season that followed, one by one, starting with the child’s parent, who had been the one to pray, and ending with the hundredth and fifty eight person, who was the last in the village, not counting the child revived, all fell ill. And they one and all fell into death. And the child yet lives.

Something like that.

It didn’t take 158 lives to bring back a single child. Not when it came to rumans. Both parents ought to have been enough. But Midnight was not providing a free service. The prayer of someone who was trusted by so many, trusted with their lives, and yet willing to pray away such trust and love… it had been a unique opportunity.

One hundred and fifty-eight lives, for that of a loved one. It was a bargain Star was glad to make as well.

‘Beware, child, this is but the first attempt. Do not get your hopes too high up,’ the aspect of Wish within her reminded her. Strangely, it was at times like this, when their goals were most aligned, that they were more often two than one inside.

Midnight nodded.
She was far away from that sandy hellhole of a village now. Worlds away. The place she was in was clean and orderly: a black smooth floor, like obsidian polished to a mirror sheen. Violet gems of various sizes and geometrical shapes floated above it, reflected into the sleek ground. It was icy cold and free of life, but that was hardly a problem for her current form.

Midnight had brought the one hundred and fifty six remaining souls, or whatever passed for souls in this world. They crowded around her. They looked like tiny orange flames, smaller than those of a table candle.

Hekapoo. It all reminded her of Hekapoo.

Well, it wasn’t the Forger of Scissors’ domain anymore. It was hers. Which meant those ‘souls’ were hers for the taking. She closed her eyes and extended all six arms, the wand floating on its own in front of her.

First, she made a bubble of air, and water, and heat. A tiny atmosphere for her mom to arrive to. She was a Butterfly too, she would transform and survive the airless environment, if she were to arrive to it, but still, Star wanted her to be comfortable. It had taken her a while, even after her resurrection, to feel at ease in the void of space. She didn’t imagine Moon would appreciate coming back to that.

Then, a body. That part was easy, if somewhat awkward. Star remembered her mom well enough, and understood her own biology. Within hours, laying in front of her, was a vessel in the living image of her mother, the queen. Well, not yet living per se, but…

Midnight consumed the tiny flames around her, turned them into the raw stuff of magic. With those lives as fuel, she tried to open a doorway to the place she had once visited, to the place beyond which even Sam could not cross.

It was not like bringing the little girl back, not in the slightest. It was deeper, and farther, and darker than that. Was it because it had happened dimensions away? Was it because it was her mother, a Butterfly?

‘Yes and no,’ she heard Wish answer.

She pushed further. It was like dipping down, but doing so into a metaphysical pool of tar, only to find out that the bottom was rock solid, and still miles up from where she wanted to go. One by one, the useless ruman ‘souls’ went off like birthday candles, and yet she was no closer to finding her mom’s own.

‘Stop.’

And she obeyed. Because she had promised she always would.

‘Why? Why doesn’t it work!?’ She didn’t know if she was crying, or if she even could. ‘It was so easy with that dumb girl!’

‘It was easy with your warnicorns too,’ the part of her that was Wish replied. ‘But it is as we’ve long suspected. The creatures here are constructed by a… lesser power. They are not equivalent to you or your mom.’

‘But, but… you promised.’

‘Yes, in time.’
Star knew they couldn’t lie. It brought her back to their senses. It brought them back in sync.

‘Then? Now what?’

‘Now we wait. We wait for Jackie, and for Marco. We wait for more wishes and prayers. We keep the flames to ourselves, so that more and more of the Forger of Scissors becomes part of us…’ It ceased being a dialog then, it was just her thoughts.

Midnight had only to wait. Wait for her beloveds first, then wait to be able to break free of this dimension, to undo what Hekapoo had done to the rest of herself, to the rest of Wish. Then, in the fullness of her power, she would go to Mewni, and once there, she would bring back her mom.

Lives here and lives there were not equivalent. But she had been a princess, and she had been loved enough, trusted enough. And if not, there were always other people’s desires, other people’s prayers. If she had to repeat what she had just done, but use a hundred and fifty-eight mewmans instead, she would. As long as her mom came back… as long as she could fix everything…

But, for now, Jackie and Marco were still far away, and it would not be soon that they arrived. Midnight didn’t eat, didn’t sleep, didn’t breathe, but, somehow, she still seemed to age. Star had no desire to be a withered old lady by the time they came to her.

She held the wand, and the star in the center shone bright.

A single flying violet gem among the many in the sky around her floated down to meet her. Then, taking a page out of great-great-whatever-grandma Eclipsa’s beauty regimen, Star stepped into the crystal.

The affairs of this world could use a less direct hand, anyways.

----

The Sixth Avatar of Midnight walked down the stairs of the ruined temple of Juridinn, now reclaimed in the name of the dusk priesthood. It was her tallest body yet, and Midnight appreciated the fact that the steep steps posed her little difficulty. It didn’t compare to flying around on her own wings, but if such were the sacrifices one had to make for eternal youth, then so be it.

The real downside was, of course, that both her hands were missing. Her arms turned into stumps right after the elbow. But hands weren’t such a big deal, either. Ruman hands were too weak anyways. If the Sixth Avatar needed something moved, then she would order it moved. If she needed something killed, well, that was what her spells were for!

She took this form mainly to speak to her followers, without the need for prayer, and she could do that just as easily without arms.

Two of her ‘shadows’, as the rumans had nicknamed her iron and bone warnicorns, flanked her now, one on each side. Six priests scrambled behind her, not wanting to appear to be holding up their deity’s incarnation, nor daring to race past her. They could remain behind her all they wanted, up to and until there was a door in front. That was one thing that hands would have been mightily useful for, actually.

They were exposed on all sides as they came down the highly visible front stairs of the old temple. Around them, debris from the rest of the ruins made it all too easy for someone to hide, lying in wait for them to descend. Frankly, the ambush shouldn’t have come as a surprise. But, well, it did.

Wouldn’t be much of an ambush if it hadn’t, now, would it?
Midnight’s avatar hadn’t even made it down the stairs when the lance of inchoate blackness pierced her throat. She turned around, just in time to see the black haired tattooed girl jump out from behind a crumbled wall, sharp red magical arrowheads flying right at the heads of her warnicorn.

Janna had gotten really good at this stuff. She had crushed her borrowed vocal cords first. Without the wand, and without her real body, that made it too damn costly to try and cast a spell to save herself.

Instead, Midnight simply rolled her eyes, annoyed, and let herself die.

----

The Seventh Avatar of Midnight woke up on her bed a moment later. The night around her was quiet. She lifted both her hands, and climbed up on her feet.

Ok, fine, so this one had arms, whole arms, with hands and everything. And legs - shorter, sure, but still… legs. So, then, what was she missing this time?

There was always something missing. Always something they had traded for whatever they had prayed for. Otherwise there was no wish, and no wish meant they didn’t belong to her, and if they didn’t belong to her then their bodies would never even have a chance of becoming her avatar.

So, well, what was this one missing?

She stretched. She covered one eye, and then the other. She touched her sides and tried singing. No sound. A mute, then? Wait… no, not quite.

Star kicked hard against the wooden floor. Nothing. Not a peep, not a creak.

She ran her borrowed right hand through the sides of her hair, first one and then the other. Oh! Well, that explained why it was so quiet around here.

This one had no ears.

The Seventh Avatar of Midnight shrugged. She could deal with that.

----

“Right after that, I stopped trying to kill the people she took over,” explained Janna, as she finished her tale.

She had been there for some of it, like the affair with Wyscan the Granter, hiding from the princess’ sight. Some of the rest, like her attempt to bring back her mom or the terms of her deal with Wish, Star herself had filled her in, during one of their spats or another. Even the resting place of Star’s original body was easy enough to reconstruct, if you had all the other facts Janna had.

“I got pretty good at conserving energy near the end, but, even so, every spell costs me a few fractions of an inch, at least.” She waved her right hand, showing Marco and Jackie the coils of the snake around it.

It wrapped around both arms now, and both legs. Her face and back too. It really only had the chest left to go to. Perhaps the witch ought to feel grateful that the cursed thing was taking the long path to her heart, but mostly she couldn’t avoid thinking of what would happen once it finally did get there.
“She had hundreds, maybe thousands, of fools praying to her, receiving her little miracles. Every one of them could turn into a new body for her to possess,” she remarked. “No use trying to kill them all. I would be dead long before she ran out. And I was never able to provoke her into showing her own self again… or into, well…”

She caressed the edge of the replica wand.

“Guess I have to hand it to you two,” she admitted. “Thanks to you, now I have another source of power, another way to fight her. With this, perhaps I have a chance.”

It was strictly less power than Midnight - than Star - had available. But the princess had never had to learn to be careful with her own magical resources the way Janna had. She didn’t need to overpower Star, she just had to outsmart her, to be more effective than she was with what she had. She needed only enough raw magical energy to give herself room to maneuver. The fake wand was plenty.

It was time to end this nightmare.
Brought Together

Chapter Summary

In which we have an abundance of reunions, a flawed plan is discussed, and our heroes are ever more divided as to the matter of Star Butterfly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 41: Brought Together

It wasn’t quite right to say that Jackie didn’t pay attention to Janna’s tale.

After all, her description of Star’s arrival, of their fight, of what she knew about the deal the princess had made with Wish - who apparently had taken over Hekapoo’s domain nineteen hundred years before Janna and Star ever crossed the portal! - of Midnight’s creation, of her rise to power and sudden disappearance, of the possessed avatars through which she now acted… it was by far the most detailed account the former knight captain had heard on the origins of their enemy. It was Janna’s knowledge, and Janna’s plan, which had the greatest chance of ending the hopeless war that Jackie and the air raiders had spent thirteen years fighting. Of course she was listening!

And yet…

And yet it would also be a lie not to mention that a part of her was elsewhere.

A part of Jackie was back inside the tunnels, in the ruins of what had apparently once been Qur Don. A part of Jackie was frozen in time, feet firmly planted far apart for leverage, arms set in place like those of a bronze statue, hands around the golden hilt of her crystal blade, as she drove the point forward into yielding mortal flesh.

A part of Jackie kept reading the mute girl’s lips, as they repeated the same silent words over and over in a never-ending loop of cruel memory: ‘Thank you.’

“So, you intentionally lured both us and Silence to the control room, all along planning to grab the magic wand from her,” she heard Marco ask. “So that you can use it to fight Star?”

“Yes, that’s the idea,” Janna answered. It was strange to think of this old woman as Janna, as the girl they had grown up together with, back in Echo Creek. “It’s not the real thing, obviously. This one is just a replacement that she wiped up in a hurry. She probably still has the original, and maybe she doesn’t even need it anymore, not in her real body. But there is plenty enough power in this thing, and I think I can use it better than she can.”

“Then…” Marco trailed off. “Why not use it to capture her? To drive Wish away? To bring Star back somehow? I know you two have your issues, but…”

He sounded desperate. He clung to the hope that Star could be reformed, that she wouldn’t need to be killed, that she was still the person they knew back on Earth. Fifty-nine crosses flashed in Jackie’s mind. She remained silent.
“Marco, seriously, don’t be daft!” Janna retorted, annoyed. “If I fail, our parents, our friends, everyone on Earth will die. If she doesn’t do it, then Sam will. And she could do it too, you know? Before he even gets the chance. Do you have any idea how many lives she has taken while in here?”

Even Jackie had to admit she didn’t know the count, not even as a rough estimate.

She had met plenty of them, though, Midnight’s victims. She had cared deeply for many of them, loved some and, a few hours ago, she had killed one.

Silence. She had been innocent. She had helped Marco escape both Midnight and her priesthood. Her only crime, if any, had been to pray, to pray for the ability to see, to pray for her own survival. She had thanked Jackie for ending her life…

“But… but it’s not her fault…” Marco argued. “She wouldn’t have done that if Wish wasn’t there, forcing her, possessing her…”

Jackie wanted to agree with him. And she hated herself. She hated that she wanted to save Star, after all she had done. She also hated that she had resolved not to. She had to side with Janna on this one.

“She made a deal with them,” the old woman replied, dryly. She examined the back of her bony hand as she spoke, the black lines of the snake tattoo along her wrinkled arm. “She knew the consequences.”

“She did it for us!” Marco yelled, tears shining in starlight. He shivered, and not just from the dry chill of the night around them. “She made a deal with Wish, because, according to what you just told us, that was the only way to save our lives! Jackie’s and mine. Lives you put in danger!”

Jackie had thought about it too. About Star’s wish. This one… and the first one as well. Because, hadn’t there been a first wish? A long time ago, as Jackie and Marco were just beginning to date, as Star watched them unseen?

“She thought it was the only way to save you,” Janna corrected him. “I am not so sure. For all we know, you were always going to make it, and Star decided to go all… all Dark Queen Ascended, over nothing at all.”

But, Jackie thought, suppose they weren’t always going to make it. Suppose that Star’s wishes - that Wish, the entity - really could rewrite reality, change the timeline or whatever it was they did, change whether they were alive or dead. And, what is more, couldn’t they change their feelings too? Their thoughts? Their desires?

“It doesn’t matter, Janna,” Marco spat back. “She did this for us, for me. I would have done the same in her place. So, if you are going to condemn her, if you are going to blame her… then blame me as well!”

Star’s first wish had been for her and Marco to be together, and Jackie too. Jackie loved Marco. She loved Orel as well. But she had also loved Gwendolyn and Adalheidis, and she had at least fancied Kara and the others. And, well, much as she regretted it now, she had loved Star, she still loved Star.

“Marco, I already do,” Janna stated, calmly. “I do blame you. Not for her stupid deal, but for coming with in the first place, and for setting us all on this road. She was grieving her mom’s death, she was throwing a tantrum, but you were the one who encouraged her, who said we should
come here to seek out Wish. So, I do blame you, for humoring her moronic quest, for dragging us
to hell… literally.”

Jackie hadn’t liked girls before, back in Echo Creek. At least, she didn’t think she had. Was that
also part of Star’s wish? Had she somehow changed that too? Fixed it, just like her second wish had
fixed her and Marco being dead?

Had Star ‘fixed’ who she was?

“Dragging you to hell, Janna? Like you didn’t jump at the damn opportunity! Like you weren’t the
one to make a goddamn deal with the devil to get us there! Like you weren’t the one to mess things
up on the silver stairs!” growled Marco, standing up, clenching his fists. The old woman remained
seated, with a bored look on her face. “If not for your outburst, Star would never have become
Midnight either. So, why not blame yourself too for once?”

Janna sighed. “Marco… of course I blame myself. Duh! I never said I didn’t. Why do you think I
am doing all this?”

She stood up then, giving her back to the other two humans. She held the stone wand on her right
hand.

“Anyways, we’ve talked enough,” she concluded. “I have shit to do.”

“Wait, Janna,” Jackie finally spoke. She did so quietly, but firmly. “We haven’t.” She paused. “We
haven’t talked enough. You haven’t told us yet what you plan to do, exactly. You are just going to
go find Star’s body, and then what? Do battle until one of you is dead? All on your own? Is that
really the plan?”

“Sure,” the elderly woman shrugged. “Field of crystals, no atmosphere. Easy enough to fix with
this thing. Getting there is tricky, but…”

“Let me go with you!” Jackie interrupted her. She stood up as well and patted the nacre scabbard
by her side. “It’s not a magic wand, but we know it works against Wish, chances are it works
against Midnight as well.”

“It’s Sam’s,” Janna noted noncommittally. “Of course it would work.”

“Then it’s decided,” Jackie said, brokering no argument.

“Are you going to be stupid, though?” Janna asked, with pretty much the diplomatic chops one
would expect of someone who had been living alone underground for decades. “If you think you
can turn this into a rescue mission, then…”

“That’s not it,” Jackie reassured her. “Look, I… I care for Star. I won’t lie to you and say I don’t.
But I have been here long enough to get to know Midnight too. The Star I knew, the Star we
knew… she wouldn’t want to be… that.”

‘Thank you,’ had mouthed Silence, as Jackie drove the sword into her chest.

“Wait, Jackie, no, there has to be another way!” protested Marco. His glance snapped away from
Janna, as he swiveled around to face his girlfriend with a wounded look. “There has to be…”

“Dude, I am sorry.” Jackie walked up to him, reaching up to put a gentle hand upon his muscular
shoulder. Marco would always be too kind for this sort of thing. It wasn’t a bad way to be. It
wasn’t a flaw, to be kind. “You don’t have to come with. You don’t have to do this. No one
should.”

Marco looked down. Janna said nothing.

Jackie hugged the boy. She wondered what he was thinking. What did he think of her, now that she had promised to kill their former beloved?

She took a step back and gave him a pleading look. When he didn’t say anything, she nodded and turned back to the older woman.

“So, Janna, what now?” she asked.

The wizened old witch seemed to think it through for a second, looking at Jackie right in the eyes. Finally, she nodded.

“I’ll need some time to figure out a few things about the wand, to make sure I know exactly what I have to work with,” Janna explained.

“Oh, that’s good,” the former knight captain remarked. “Then I also have something to do before that.”

Orel.

She had to make sure he had made it out alive. Pearl and Sunbolt too.

She was supposed to meet the mage at their backup reunion point if they got separated during the raid on the tunnels, as they had. The time was set four or five hours from now, at dawn. It was for safety, so they could both spot an ambush. The dragoncycle would find them there on her own. The griffon only if Orel had been able to retrieve him.

“Also, we need to arrange for transport,” Janna added. “The dimension where Star left her body is within the same domain as this one, but it’s not the exact same dimension. It’s close enough that I am sure I could punch a hole to there with this thing if I really had to,” she waved the wand around, “but I don’t want to waste that much power right before the fight.”

“I don’t suppose we can just fly there?” Jackie asked.

“No. Like I said, it’s still another dimension, even if it’s a close one. We need a dimensional portal,” the witch clarified. “That’s not really something I can do without waste. I just don’t have any practice with that sort of thing.”

“Then?” the former knight captain pressed her for an answer.

“Well, we need an expert, of course,” Janna grinned. “And I know just the person. We don’t even need to go seeking for her. She knows where we are. All we need is to give her a way to hide.”

Janna traced a finger just above the surface of the glowing star inside the stone wand. She pulled out a wisp of flame, like a bright thread of cotton candy. Then, with a delicate gesture, she flicked it upwards.

The diaphanous fireball went up, a few meters over their heads, and then exploded silently, into a dense bubble of violet and blue sparks. It was like a firework, but ten times as beautiful as any Jackie had ever seen, and infinitely more gentle. The sphere of glimmering fireflies that formed around the quiet ‘explosion’ reminded her a bit of Star’s shielding spells, her glittering something-or-other bubble. It wasn’t the same, though, this bubble was larger, and dimmer, and thinner, and
altogether less solid.

Instead of dissipating, the shimmering ball of sparks began floating back down and expanding outwards, less a sphere now than an amorphous rolling veil of bright-colored fog. Wherever the fog went, things seemed to become less defined, less clear, less substantial. Not so much that they weren’t there any more, or that Jackie couldn’t see them, just harder to notice in a way that was difficult to pin down.

She looked down at her own hands, and realized she could see through them to the floor below. They had all become, not exactly invisible but, somehow, half-translucent, even more distinctly insubstantial than the scenery around them.

“W… what is this?” Jackie asked, trying and failing to suppress her surprise.

“This,” Janna explained, grinning, “is how you properly hide from an ‘all-seeing’ eye.”

There were pockets like this in every domain, holes in the flows of magic that allowed scrying, blind spots for even the legitimate ruler of the land. Tom’s own underworld had hundreds of them. And so, apparently, did ‘meanie’s domain, formerly Hekapoo’s.

The demon prince had spent the last month or so inside one such spot: underground, in a cave, below an endless ocean of fog, in one of the three main dimensions that comprised the bulk of this literally godforsaken world.

The god in question was doing most of her forsaking by hiding alongside him.

Weeks ago, Tom had asked Hekapoo why they hadn’t brought Marco to this cave as well, why they couldn’t take him into hiding too. Surely she knew and cared more for the human than she did for the demon prince.

Through her childish tantrums, and crippling lack of grown-up words, the Forger of Scissors had managed to explain that ‘meanie’, whatever it was, had a particular interest in Marco. That it would be watching him, and that if he were to suddenly disappear from sight altogether, well, it would make meanie’s current attempts at searching for the former owner of these lands seem tame by comparison. They wouldn’t be able to keep their hiding place secret for long, and she didn’t know of many others.

A warm cloud slid over the stump of his missing right arm. It was the wetness of the fog, exhaled through nostrils that might as well be connected to a coal furnace. The sauna-like steam fell soothingly over the huge white mass of hard-won scar tissue.

Tom’s arm was no longer trying to regenerate. A few days back, his body seemed to have finally made peace with its own crippledness, and his owner was all the better for it. No more painful cycles of flesh growth and agonizing recarbonization.

“There, there, girl,” Tom muttered, as he caressed the snout which had exhaled such warmth. Nachos purred in response. “I know, I know. We are all impatient, but we still need to wait. It shouldn’t be long now,” he reassured the dragoncycle. Then, he himself feeling unsure, he added, “Right, Hekapoo?”

“Umphf,” Hekapoo exhaled, her arms crossed in front of her as she sat against the opposite end of the cavern. She had her legs carelessly splayed across the floor, like someone had just thrown the pintsize goddess there and she couldn’t even muster the care to move herself from whichever
position she just happened to have fallen in. “That’s what I said earlier, didn’t I?”

“That’s what you said when I first got here, too!” Tom retorted.

“And it is still going to be soon after that too,” Hekkapoo clarified. “You think you’ve been waiting here long, dumbo? I’ve been here for centi... centu... for hundreds of years!” she protested. “But, right now, we are talking... I dunno... hours? Minutes? It depends when they are done chatting, ok?”

“You can see them!” Tom asked, surprised. He assumed, with some confidence, that ‘they’ meant Marco and Jackie.

Hekapoo had apparently been following Marco’s journey on and off since the beginning. Sometimes, she even told Tom about what the human boy was doing. He knew he had survived his encounter with the iron and bone warnicorn, and then that he had escaped ‘meanie’ somehow, and found Jackie, and they had both fled from ‘meanie’ a second time.

The trail had disappeared soon after, though. Apparently, Jackie had also found a pocket of safety within this domain, a place where Hekapoo couldn’t track her or Marco. Good for them! It meant they were beyond ‘meanie’s reach as well, even if possibly only for a short time.

But, well, if Hekapoo could see them now...

“Does that mean she can see them too?” the demon prince asked, worried.

“Duh, yeah,” the tiny goddess replied. “Meanie found them two days ago.”

She needlessly showed Tom how many days that was with her fingers.

“Two days?! And only now you mention it?” he exclaimed, jumping up.

Nachos withdrew her snout just in time to avoid it being hit by the boy’s stump. She seemed somewhat miffed at the abrupt movement, then began slowly pacing away from him.

Tom sighed, closed his eyes, and did a quick silent count down from ten. No point in getting angry at Hekapoo. The fiery munchkin never took well to criticism, and reprimanding her or getting into an argument again would only result in more precious time being lost. It’s just... the demon prince really wished she did a better job keeping him in the loop.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” he urged, instead. “We should go join them, strength in numbers and all that. Hopefully we are still on time!”

After all, that’s why he had spent days painstakingly melting away the huge amber drop surrounding Nachos. Wasn’t it?

 Apparently, that had just been some magical means of preserving her alive until Marco came back for her, designed by the original Hekapoo and gladly agreed to by the dragoncycle herself - assuming she understood the idea to begin with and hadn’t just walked into an eons long confinement just because she trusted her temporary owner. But, of course, new-Hekapoo couldn’t undo the crystallization spell her older self had cast. So, instead, she had bossed Tom around to do it. And, in return, she couldn’t even be bothered to tell him anything about anything important!

“We aren’t going yet, dumbo!” The strange child gave him a dirty look. “She’ll let us know when it’s safe.”

He got no reply. The Forger of Scissors acted like she hadn’t heard him. He knew well enough by now that, if he tried repeating the question, she would be certain to ‘not hear’ him again.

“Wait, wait… you said meanie found them two days ago?” Tom tried a different angle, rewinding what Hekapoo had said in his head.

“Yup. Found their hiding spot. Hurt their friends. Kept chasing them right into a trap,” the kid explained, impatiently.

“Wait, they fell into a trap?” Tom asked. “Marco and Jackie? Are they ok?”

“Not them.” Hekapoo rolled her eyes. “Meanie fell into the trap. Jackie stabbed her puppet. Shunk! Sphhhl!” She lazily pantomimed the motions as she made stabbing sounds with her mouth.

“That’s… good, I think,” Tom said, feeling slightly calmer, but even more confused.

“It didn’t feel good, I think…” Hekapoo trailed off. She sighed, seeming a bit more serious for a second. She did that, sometimes. “Things are not good. Things are very not good. Marco is feeling… sad, Jackie is… scary, and their other friend is both. And I don’t wanna do it. I don’t wanna go down there. I don’t wanna get hurt, and I will. I know I will…” Her voice cracked for a second and she inhaled, loudly.

“But it’s what I was made for, isn’t it?” she asked, helplessly. “To go fight and… and die like the old me? I really really don’t wanna do that!”

Tom looked at the Forger’s face. There weren’t any tears, not exactly, but there was a soggy shadow in the lower half of her eyes, one that couldn’t be explained away as part of the wet fog around them. Her tiny fists were clenched far too tightly, in stark contrast to her otherwise slack resting body.

“Um, right. I mean… I am scared too,” Tom admitted. He ran his left hand over the stump on the right.

He wasn’t good at this. He wasn’t good with kids, and even worse with comforting ancient magical entities, both more powerful and wiser than himself, who had magically regressed themselves back to being kids.

“You know this ‘meanie’ of yours better than I do, and you are, well, you are the Forger of Scissors, you are Hekapoo,” he pointed out. “If you are scared, then I am sure there is good reason to be scared. So I am not going to lie or pretend otherwise. But, still, our friends are out there fighting, no? We can’t really leave them on their own.” They had done that long enough, in his opinion, but he kept that to himself.

Hekapoo nodded, uncertain.

“Besides, well,” Tom grinned, “this place really is pretty damn boring.”


She seemed proud to remember the word, and Tom didn’t bother to point out that she pronounced it a bit like she was talking about roman armies and not the span of time.

They sat in silence for a few more minutes. Then, suddenly, the pintsize goddess’ eyes went wide.
She gulped and looked at him like she ought to say something, but couldn’t.

“Now?” confirmed Tom.

“Y… yeah,” Hekapoo said. “I can’t feel them anymore, which means they hid from meanie too. We need to go, before she realizes.”

She stood up, then lifted her safety scissors. The furry white hand holding the handle trembled a bit.

Tom walked up to Hekapoo. He put his left hand - the only one he had - on her right shoulder. Nachos, for her part, pressed her snout against the girl’s left side. The mistress of dimensional travel sighed and made a single precise cut through the air.

Side by side, the strange trio walked through the gold and orange vortex, until they were in a phantasmagoric night desert, staring at an even stranger mirage: three human figures, all half-translucent and framed by violet fireflies, just like the dunes and rocks and bushes around them. The figures stared back at them, reflecting their own surprise.

Tom saw Marco, same adult age as last time; his body seemed so much healthier compared to the dehydrated mess at the petrified forest, but his lusterless eyes told a different story. Then he noticed Jackie, all grown up, and grown cold, and he immediately knew what Hekapoo had meant before, when she said she was scary. Finally, he saw the old woman, covered in black coiling marks, hunched over the stone wand, wrinkled but not in the least bit frail…

“…Janna!?”

“Tom?” replied the white haired woman. She seemed as surprised to see him here as he was to see her.

“Nachos!” shouted Marco, as he ran in between the two of them, kneeling down in the last moment to catch the jumping dragoncycle. He held the half-dragon’s forepaws up with his arms, as she licked his face and gave out a loud semi-mechanic purr of contentment. “Oh, I am so happy to see you are alright, Boo!”

“Um, sure, focus on the ‘cycle, big dumbo,” came an annoyed voice from behind Tom.

Marco raised his head from Nachos’ muzzle, only to have his eyes open wide with shock at what he saw. “Hekapoo…!? You are alive? What happened to you?” Then finally. “And Tom, man, glad to see you again!”

“Alright everyone, we can continue this as we walk,” Janna spoke. Tom turned away from Marco and towards her, but this time he failed to meet her eyes for some reason. Her voice had turned cold too. “We need to get moving. Star can’t see us anymore, but she still knows where we disappeared. If we are not somewhere else in the next five minutes, then this whole thing is going to be pointless.”

“Wait… Star?” Tom asked.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t considered the possibility - frankly, there had been plenty enough hints - but Hekapoo had never exactly confirmed who ‘meanie’ was. The faces around him now, however, were more than enough confirmation.

Crap!
The group began marching soon after. They followed Janna, and she followed the wind, or something like the wind. A strange, likely magical, breeze moved the shimmering violet sparks of the hiding spell. As long as they followed the spell’s erratic movements, they would remain hidden; Midnight would have no way of predicting their path, or knowing where the blind spot in her vision had moved to. Or so had their old friend explained.

Jackie and Tom had taken to march right behind Janna, who seemed intent on avoiding the demon prince entirely. Apparently, she hadn’t expected him to be there when Hekapoo arrived. Marco wasn’t sure what was going on in her head regarding that particular change in plans, but she certainly didn’t look too happy about it. Janna had always been one to keep a grudge, even back before she had gone and turned herself into the Wicked Witch of the West or whatever.

So, Jackie had offered to bring Tom up to date with things, which also gave her a convenient excuse to avoid Marco in turn, of course. What was worse, Marco was glad for it! If she didn’t, then they would be forced to have an argument. He couldn’t just say nothing about the fact that she was willing to go along with Janna’s plan to kill Star. Could he?

Frankly, he didn’t know what to think. It made sense. It made logical sense. Possessed or not, Star was dangerous. She had done terrible things, Marco knew that. He wasn’t in denial there or anything.

So he couldn’t really blame Jackie. He couldn’t argue with her, not after what had happened to the Air Raiders, what he knew they meant to her. And, at the same time, he couldn’t agree to help her, to support her, when the outcome of her chosen course of action would be a dead Star and a future Jackie who would always live with that murder in her memories…

It was a superimposition of betrayal. Whether he helped Jackie kill Star, or tried to protect Star from Jackie, he would be betraying them both.

It also didn’t help that a part of Marco just wanted to punt, to run away, to convince Jackie to just ride this out with him. A part of him could live with Janna doing this horrible thing that had to be done, and then hating her for it.

Fundamentally, he was a coward.

As for bringing Star back to who she used to be? Freeing her and redeeming her? Marco talked big game there, but he really wasn’t sure he actually believed it could be done.

‘Right. What cause could you possibly have to believe that evil people can be redeemed?’ Kar offered, sarcastically.

Marco sighed, internally. ‘That’s different. You were different. There is no way Star can go back to who she was before.’ None of them could.

‘That’s not what I said.’

‘Ok, so let’s say there is a chance. What if I fail? What if I get in the way? What if I go there trying to ‘rescue’ Star and end up causing Janna and Jackie to fail?’ he asked his mental co-pilot. ‘We couldn’t even save Silence! Should we have tried? Back there? Even if that messed up Janna’s plan?’

Kar didn’t have an answer to that.
Instead, a different voice interrupted Marco’s inner dialog.

“So, um, do you remember what the other me said to you, on a dream?” Hekapoo asked.

Marco turned around to see her. The three of them had been marching together for a few minutes: Hekapoo, Nachos, and him. They were holding the rear of the group, and Marco’s hand kept lazily stroking the dragoncycle’s horns and the space right at the back of her neck, as he thought through their situation.

He hadn’t meant to ignore Hekapoo either. He was glad to see her alive, even if not quite in the way he expected. After all, a long time ago, she had been the main reason they all had traveled here. But, well, it soon became clear that she didn’t know much more about Wish than they did. Plus, it wasn’t exactly easy to talk with this particular clone (if indeed that’s what she was), and there was just so much in his mind right now, and…

“Hey, big dumbo, do you remember or not?” she repeated herself.

Marco sighed. “You said you were dying, and so was your world.”

“I guess we both are,” said Hekapoo. She seemed to be waiting for him to go on.

“You said you sent two aspects of yourself,” Marco continued.

“I think those are… the dream itself, and, um, well… me.” She seemed to be in deep thought, straining herself to understand, or to make sure she wasn’t misunderstanding.

“You ‘think’?” Marco asked. “You mean you don’t remember?”

“I know only what the old Hekapoo wanted me to know, and she had to… pick. Obviously she wouldn’t waste time giving you the same stuff twice, doo-doo face!” the mini-Hekapoo explained, annoyed. “So, what else did I say?”

“That there were also two aspects of the thing that killed you,” Marco noted. “That’s Wish, right?”

“Sure is,” Hekapoo confirmed. “Meanie is one.”

“And the ghosts back in hell were the other?” Marco pressed, wanting to be sure.

“No idea. Don’t know anything about that.” Hekapoo crossed her arms. “Tell me.”

Marco described the ghosts, he explained how they took Toffee’s and Moon’s form, and Hekapoo’s own, and Ludo’s. He told her about their encounter in Tom’s domain and the one in the silver stairs.

“Yeah… sounds about right,” she conceded. “Didn’t get it all. But it sounds like it… like part of bigger meanie… ‘Wish’ or whatever…”

“You also said that one of your aspects would explain things, and the other would reveal a powerful ally, and to look for you,” he tried to recall, “and that the next time we met the roles would be reversed.”

The Hekapoo ‘aspect’ made a face. “Old me is suuuch a smartass. She means you were a kid back then and now… ugh… it means she knew I was going to turn out like this!”

“Really?” Marco asked. “But, I wasn’t a kid when I spoke to her in the dream… I was grown up, like I am when I am here…”
Child-Hekapoo chuckled. “Compared to her? You were. Still *are.*”

Marco couldn’t help but to frown a bit at that. Sure, Hekapoo was vast and ancient and powerful. But, well, she had also been his friend, or at least some of her clones had. They had even dated once. Did she really see him as - he glanced at the tiny fiery gradeschooler besides him - *that*?

“I don’t suppose you are that powerful ally she was talking about, are you?” Marco asked, a bit frustrated with the conversation.

“Uh, you really are *dumb,* you know?” came Hekapoo’s response. “I am the other one, the explany one.”

“Really? Because you are not doing the best job at it, frankly,” Marco noted, perhaps a bit more exasperated than he should be, particularly with a young child.

“I…” She paused mid stride, then had to run the next few steps to catch up to him. “I know, ok?” Hekapoo grumbled back. “I am *trying*.”

There was a brief lull in the conversation after that, punctuated by a long unpreoccupied yawn from Nachos.

“Ok, fine, let’s do it another way,” Hekapoo finally added. “What do you want to know?”

“Well, for example, I really don’t see what worthy ally we got out of the other aspect,” Marco pointed out. “She just showed up in a dream, said…” his heart sank for a bit there. “…said goodbye, gave that bunch of cryptic advice I already mentioned, and then I woke up. She didn’t lead us to any ‘mighty ally’, so…”

“Pffft,” the tiny forger of scissors made a sound that was two parts a laugh and one part a raspberry. “But that one is *so* easy! You really are a big dumbo, you know?”

Marco stared back, as surprised as he was insulted.

Ok, no, a bit more insulted than surprised, actually.

“There.” She pointed at Marco’s chest.

“And there.” She moved her finger to indicate his right arm.

“Not one, but two ‘mighty’ allies!” she exclaimed. She made quotation signs with her fingers around the adjective, but nonetheless was smiling at him.

The human stared at her in surprise. Then, slowly, a forgotten part of Hekapoo’s dream riddle came to mind. He repeated aloud, “One to find you, and one to be found. One to explain, the other to reveal a worthy ally. *Look for me to find yourself*…”

The dreams. The memories of the rituals. Kar!

Everything had started coming back after that dream, after the aspect of Hekapoo had spoken to him. It had all come back as Marco searched for her, while finding instead the version of himself that had once ruled Zonst, and fought monsters and spirits, led armies and traversed inhospitable wastelands, the version of himself that would be needed to survive all the trials he’d have to face to find the second aspect of Hekapoo, the one right in front of him now.

“Seemed pretty obvious to me.” The pintsize forger of scissors shrugged.
So, Hekapoo had specifically set him on the path to becoming this version of himself again. And that had been the real Hekapoo, not this diminished version of her or the echo in his dreams. It had been the Hekapoo who had ruled these dimensions for millions of years, the one who sat in the Magic High Commission, the only one they knew to have ever faced off against the full power of Wish and managed to, it not win, at least genuinely set them back.

If she thought he would be a worthy ally in the battle to come, then how dared Marco think of giving up!?

“She got you there, ‘big dumbo.’”

As Marco once again got lost in his own thoughts, the demonic tentacle had decided to emerge back out of his right arm. Nachos started licking the slimy body, while the appendage itself coiled around the dragoncycle and scratched her neck.

“Oh, hey Kar!” Hekapoo greeted him cheerfully.

Right, so Marco wasn’t going to let Janna do the fighting. He wasn’t going to try to convince Jackie to hide with him, either. He was going with them to find Star. And then… well, then he had to hope he would know what to do, and once he knew, he then had to hope that he would be able to do it, whatever it was. But, apparently, Hekapoo had trusted him enough to consider him a worthy ally! That meant he had to believe in himself!

Well, either that, or she had just been desperate enough to try anything she still could manage.

----

They followed the magical mist through the sandy desert dunes, past short rocky cliffs and sparse dry underbrush. They marched vaguely westward, and vaguely northward, and certainly upwards and further inland, to where the sand grew coarser and the ground beneath them more solid.

Eventually, they left the flats and reached an area where rock formations crested out of the dunes like a sharp archipelago emerging from a dry ocean. Maybe, the demon thought, that’s exactly what it was, at least in geological terms: an island chain in the middle of a former ocean.

Eventually, the mist, or Janna, or both, guided them to the edge of a tall long mesa, and then through a slithering path which climbed it. There, along that path, was a cave entrance. Soon they were all again inside walls of stone.

It wasn’t nearly as deep as the place in which he and Hekapoo had been hiding for months, nor probably quite as safe. But it was better than staying out in the open until dawn came, and between that and the mist, they had probably bought themselves a day or two of respite.

While they all walked, Tom had been thinking, and he had been listening. Jackie had filled him in on so much, and yet he still felt that he knew so little. But he knew one thing. He knew what he had to do.

The cave was shallow, but it was wide. As the tired group arrived, they naturally settled in different corners of the place. Marco, Hekapoo, and Nachos on one end, gathering around the light of the sorceress’ flame; himself and Jackie in the dark middle; and Janna on the far side, sitting on a stone ledge near the cave’s entrance, hunched over the violet flame of the wand.

Tom stood up. Jackie gave him a nod of encouragement.

He went where he had to go.
“So, um, Janna…” he racked his brains for an opener. “How have the last few decades been treating you?” He laughed nervously.

Eligos’ horse! That had been terrible! Not even Marco could have come up with something that lame!

The witch didn’t glance up at him. Instead, she kept looking down, focused on the wand. She muttered something into it, before calmly reaching inside the burning star with her free hand and pulling out a wisp of flame. She held it in her palm, like an ephemeral piece of fiery cotton candy. It melted over her skin, until Janna’s open hand seemed to burn violet, apparently without hurting her at all.

She stood up. Tom flinched. But Janna didn’t turn towards him, didn’t even acknowledge him. Instead, she walked a few steps towards the mouth of the cave.

The demon took in her movements. She looked much older, and she seemed tired, but not in the way one might have expected. She wasn’t weak or frail at all. She had marched for hours, they all had, and yet she moved swiftly now, without any visible tells of physical exhaustion. Her fatigue was of a different sort. It ran deep, though.

“Oh, you know, hiding in the damp dark tunnels beneath the Earth, biding my time, eating a few goats, and a surprisingly large amount of rats,” Janna listed, boredly, still avoiding his gaze.

She dragged her magically-charged hand along the leftmost wall, close by the opening. Somehow, she was pulling the stone itself with it, as if she were closing a curtain. And, when she finally let it go, the stone just kept on moving. The mouth of the cave gradually closed in front of them, trapping them underground. Or, rather, Tom realized, keeping them safe inside.

The mountainside shifted slowly, ponderously, and yet unnaturally silent. What ought to have been an earthquake-like rumble, was instead six awkward seconds of silence.

“Um, sorry to hear that…” the demon prince mumbled after a while. Everything around them became even darker, now that even starlight had been blocked out, leaving only the wand, and - far off - Hekapoo’s flame.

“But, like, it’s kinda hardcore too, you know?” he tried.

Janna seemed to hesitate, if only for an instant.

“Gets old quick,” she confessed, in a somewhat gentler tone than before.

“So….” Tom trailed off, “…about the stuff in Sam’s castle, with Star…”

Smooth, Lucitor, fucking smooth. So much for gently easing into the subject!

“That’s what you want to talk about, Tom?” Janna’s voice sounded angry, and surprised, and hurt. He wasn’t even sure which of those was the predominant feeling.

She finally turned to face him. Or, well, to almost face him. She was still glancing at an angle, somewhere over his right shoulder, rather than looking him in the eye.

Look, it was progress, ok?

Except, well, that’s when he noticed, even in the darkness: she was crying.
No. She had been crying. There were dried up streaks on her cheeks, and thin bloodshot veins visible inside her eyes, all highlighted by the violet light of the magic wand she was holding.

“Janna, look, I’ve been thinking about it…” Tom began.

He had! He had had weeks to mull it over, inside that cramped foggy cave, after all. And then he realized Janna had had nearly half a century to stew in her anger over it! A few weeks suddenly felt painfully inadequate.

“I am sorry about what I did,” he tried, nonetheless. “And I am even more sorry about all the stuff I said afterwards. Or didn’t say. I am sorry that I tried to keep that a secret from…”

“Tom,” she interrupted him. “Are you out of your fucking mind!?”

The demon prince stopped, startled by her sudden yell. He had no trouble meeting the girl’s eyes this time. Those brown eyes, slightly dimmed by the years, red from crying, and yet… and yet there was that spark behind them, that energy and intelligence he had come to expect from her. Or was that just the reflection of the flame inside the wand?

Tom didn’t know how to respond.

‘Yes, probably,’ came to mind as an option, but he was pretty sure a joke like that would only make the whole situation worse. Plus, he wasn’t even sure what he himself even meant by that.

“I am not sure I understand…” he admitted sheepishly instead.

“Tom, don’t you hate me now?” Janna asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

“Uh…” This conversation certainly wasn’t going where the Lucitor boy had thought it would.

The girl just looked at him quizzically. She was silent for just long enough that he began to consider if he was supposed to say something. It would be awkward to just respond with the obvious negative at this point. Should he ask her again what she meant, or…

“Everyone else does, you know?” Janna continued. “Even Jackie. She agrees with me on what needs to be done now, sure, but she hates that she does, and she blames me for things getting to this point. And, well, she is partly right.” She inhaled, deeply. “I… um… you do know I am trying to kill Star, right?”

Tom nodded. “Yeah, Jackie explained.”

“And…?” Janna asked. “Aren’t you mad that I am? Isn’t Star your forever crush?”

“Ah, well…” Tom scratched the back of his head with his one remaining hand.

Janna stared, pointedly, at the scar-covered stump on his other side. Tom shifted himself to hide it, self-conscious.

“Not to mention, well, that,” Janna said, incredulous. “Tom, you saved my life! Saved my life and got seriously hurt in the process. And you didn’t have to do it. You said it yourself, you owe me nothing! And, on top of that, I’ve spent most of my life trying to murder the only person you ever gave two shits about! And you are apologizing to me?”

“Star is not the only person I care about!” protested Tom.

Janna raised an eyebrow.
“Well, she isn’t!” Tom repeated, annoyed. “There is my parents, for example. And, I can’t believe I am saying this… but Marco is my best bud, ok?”

“Tried to murder him too,” Janna pointed out, expressionless.

“And… and…” Tom sighed. Even when she was being apologetic, Janna was so… so goddamn difficult!

“And you!” he finished. “And I obviously care about you!”

Her eyes went wide, the lines on her face accentuating the expression. He thought she was just baiting him into saying it. Instead, it seemed like she was genuinely surprised to hear that.

Tom took a step forward, reached out towards her, and then… he froze. Janna was holding the wand close to her chest, firmly, with both hands, tensed up as if ready for a fight. He let his own singular hand fall back to the side. He’d only meant to hold her shoulder…

“You do…?” Janna asked, there was bitterness to her disbelief. “Since when?”

“Well, I dunno, hard to tell… pretty sure by the time we got to the silver stairs, though.” He gave her a grin to show he was half-joking. It had been much earlier than that!

She eyed him, uncertain.

“Either that, or maybe I make a habit of taking a death spell hit for people I am wholly indifferent about!” he added, sarcastically.

“Riiight,” Janna responded in kind, not letting herself be out-sassed. “Well, I mean, you aren’t as smart as you think you are, Tom. I just assumed you didn’t think it through and jumped on dumb instinct!”

“I did,” admitted Tom, sincerely.

“See!” Janna exclaimed triumphant. “Would you ever have done that if you had a second to think? If you knew that spell could hurt you like it did!?”

There was a brief pause.

“Yes.”

And a longer one, then, heavy with her shock.

“You are an idiot, Tom,” Janna said, dryly.

“Yes,” he replied, in the same tone.

“…why?” she said quietly, sitting back down on the rocky ledge, letting the wand fall to the side.

He sat beside her. She allowed it.

“Because I’d rather lose an arm than lose you,” Tom explained. “Because I still needed to apologize, and, because, Janna, it took me far too long to realize I made a mistake.”

“And what would that mistake be?” Janna asked. “Sleeping with Star?”

Well, yes, that had been a mistake. But it wasn’t quite what he meant.
“Pushing you away,” he replied.

Honest. Way too honest, actually. Tom felt exposed saying it like that, but he had been given a chance to try and set things right, and by The Astray One, he was going to take it!

Instead of saying anything, Janna stopped, turned towards him, and gesticulated with her hand to her face, and then up and down her body.

“Wrinkled. Old. Lady,” she said, pointedly, as if he would fail to notice.

He put his hand over her shoulder, and she didn’t stop him.

He leaned forward, and she didn’t stop him.

He kissed her, and she welcomed him.

Her lips were warm, her tongue nimble, and the demon prince melted into a sensation he had been missing for months. She met him with hunger and fire, and he knew she had missed it for longer.

He brushed the sharp tips of his nails against the back of her neck - lightly, yes, but not too lightly - and she purred into his mouth. Some things, clearly, hadn’t changed.

They separated, and the spell was broken, everywhere except within their eyes.

“Demon. And a cripple too,” Tom retorted after a moment. “I can deal if you can. So… what do you say we give it another try? For real this time. No need to pretend it’s some evil master plan. We can be the plan.”

“And you really don’t care that I am… well…” She looked, doubtful, at her wrinkled hands. “You know… not quite the young girl you remember?”

“Please, Janna, I am still older than you are many times over,” he pointed out. “And, just to make it clear, I live in a goddamn underworld dimension, most people I meet are demons or rotting corpses. By that standard, you are still sprightly as a sapling! Plus, frankly, you are gorgeous the way you are now: sharp, powerful, bright! I dig it! Honest!”

Janna seemed to consider his words.

“Alright,” she said, finally, cracking a small smile. “I mean, yes, sure. If we survive - big if! - we can go out again, and take it from there. I still don’t get why you would want to go out with an old hag, let alone all the other stuff. But just because you are crazy doesn’t mean I am going to say no to that, handsome!”

Tom grinned.

“Besides, if you really want to enjoy your youth, we can do that once we get back,” he added. “You’ll be back to your old self once we leave Hekapoo’s domain, after all! Just keep in mind that, well, that too won’t last forever. Sooner or later, we will both look as we do now, and I am fine with it… more than fine!... if you are.”

Uh, maybe that had been too much.

Tom just hoped he wasn’t coming on too strong there, actually. She had said yes to one date, and he was already talking about growing old together? Shit. Hold your horses, Lucitor!

Janna just sighed and looked down at the wand, then at her arm.
“So, what about these?” she asked, dragging a finger over the coils of the snake tattoo. “Those are not going to go away, whether we leave Hekapoo’s domain or not.”

“Yeah… well, not going to lie, I think those are really fucked up,” Tom conceded. Not how they looked, of course, but what they meant. “But, hey, prince of hell here, my life was never not going to be fucked up. And you should be fine, as long as you don’t use the power, right? You should be able to live the rest of your life just as if you never made that deal.”

She didn’t seem fully convinced there, but didn’t argue. Tom hoped that after everything that had happened, maybe Janna would be ready to put her magical ambitions to rest, or at least take the longer, safer, road.

“And what about your arm?” she asked instead. “Like you said, you will outlive me by thousands of years, and now you will forever be missing that, because of some girl that will live and die in the span of less than a century. How does that make sense?”

“Well, Janna, that one wasn’t really your fault, that was…” He stopped himself.

“…Star’s?” she completed the sentence, her left eyebrow raised. “So you agree with me that she is dangerous and needs to be stopped? You are alright with that? With me killing her? Assuming, well… assuming I can?”

It was Tom’s turn to be quiet.

“I didn’t say that,” he finally spoke.

He didn’t want Janna to hurt Star, no matter what she had done, no matter what she had become. More importantly, he didn’t want Star to hurt Janna, either. Given what he’d heard, even with the wand, even with Jackie’s sword…

Suddenly, the solution came to him. He smiled.

“Janna, let’s just run away!”

“What!?” she replied, incredulous.

“Let’s run away,” he repeated. It was so obvious! It was what Janna had almost done, back at the silver stairs. It would have prevented all of this if she had followed through with it back then, and it would work just as well now. “Forget about Star. You have the wand! There has to be enough magic there to at least reach another dimension, outside of Hekapoo’s domain. We can just flee this whole thing!”

Ok, he wasn’t sure that would work. Apparently Star had been unable to portal herself out of this place, and so had Hekapoo. But, well, wasn’t it at least worth a try?

“Flee where, Tom?” Janna retorted, annoyed. “If Star doesn’t kill our parents and friends, Sam will!”

Right. Ok, there was that. But still, between that and the alternative...

“We’ll take them too!” the demon prince pressed on. “We’ll go to Earth first and then to my place, and we’ll get them to flee with us. I mean, this is you and I we are talking about! How many people can there be we care about? Ten? A dozen?”

Janna laughed at that. “You are terrible, Tom!”
“I learned from the worst!” he retorted, grinning.

She smiled. Then she put a bony tattooed finger over his lips. Finally, she shook her head.

“If I survive, Tom, we’ll go out again. If you can bear looking at me after I do what needs to be done. If you still want to…” She paused. “If.”

Tom sat petrified for a moment, meeting the girl’s grim gaze. Finally, he nodded in defeated agreement.

He didn’t know what else to do.

----

So, that had happened.

Well, never mind it for now. File it away, remove it from consideration. She could not let it affect her judgement. She wasn’t Marco, and she wasn’t a little girl anymore either, so she was not going to let her feelings, her bloody ancient hormones, get in the way of saving the world. Er… worlds, plural.

She just hoped the cave was dark enough that none of the others had seen that dumb kiss!

Sure, it was just great that her teenage crush, who she hadn’t seen in seventy years - never mind that it had probably been last Tuesday for him or something - wanted to get back together with her. No, really, it was swell. But, well, the fact that they would most likely all be dead in the next twenty-four hours kind of put a damper on Janna’s romantic prospects there…

She had sent Tom back to wait with Hekapoo and Marco, while she addressed the one other person around with a shred of common sense left.

“Jackie, a word,” she said simply, motioning with her head away from the others, further towards the back of the cave.

The girl nodded and followed.


See? Common sense.

“So, you’ve fought Star before too, right?” the witch asked.

Jackie nodded, grimly.

“We portal in to that place with the crystals, I create a bubble of air, then immediately fire upon the crystal holding Star’s body. As she falls, I restrain her with the strongest holding spell I got. You begin running the moment there is air to breathe, and run her down through the heart with your sword before she has a chance to escape…” she explained.

Janna could picture every step: the portal opening, then a second to create an atmosphere, two seconds to locate Star’s crystal by sight, one more to break it to pieces. Hopefully Jackie could run up to it in less than five. Janna could probably restrain Star as long as ten.

“So, what about all that is definitely not going to work?” she asked, finally.
The other woman seemed deep in thought for a moment. She looked up, towards the ceiling of the cave, then back at Janna.

“She’s not going to be alone,” she replied.

Janna nodded.

After waiting a moment for Janna to say something, Jackie elaborated on her claims, “It’s not a given, but chances are some of her spells are going to be around, guarding her as she sleeps. A whole lot of them, probably.”

Right, that certainly was one issue.

“And she could be awake already,” the blonde continued. “She knows Marco and I are here, she knows you have her wand. No reason for her to remain in stasis. The moment we open the portal, her spells fall upon all of us while she ‘calls the darkness unto her’ directly at you. Then she captures me and Marco.”

“Right,” Janna muttered, disappointed that her original plan had turned out to be so hopelessly naive. “So, the first problem, warnicorns or whatever… do you think Hekapoo can handle them? Get them off our backs while we try to finish Star quickly?”

A surprise attack was still the only thing likely to work. She would never win a prolonged bout with the mewman princess, their brawl at the silver stairs and the petrified forest had proven just that.

“Not sure,” Jackie responded. “Hekapoo, in her current form... well, she is probably still more powerful than she seems but... the way she acts, she could be... unreliable. What about Tom?”

Janna thought about it. She made a conscious effort to suppress any guilt at the idea of putting him in danger again. This was bigger than that.

“He could help,” she admitted. “Or he could get in the way. If he is not fully bogged down fighting her spells, he could interfere with our first strike on Star. Whatever else he says, he still thinks of her as his ex, not the monster she is now.”

She looked at Jackie’s face for any reaction, any sign that she was just the same, naively hoping to bring their former friend back from the precipice she had long jumped off of. Instead, she saw only cold calculation in those green eyes of hers. A will as hard as iron.

“Marco will be a problem too,” Jackie added. “It would be better if they both stay behind, but I don’t believe they’ll do so willingly.”

Janna chuckled. “I’ll put Marco to sleep, I don’t even need to use real magic for that. Tom will be... trickier, but I’ll find an excuse.”

“Orel would help...” Jackie admitted, quietly, almost a whisper. “I don’t want him to die. But he wants Midnight destroyed as much as I do, perhaps more. He would never forgive me if we leave him behind and fail, and he can deal well with her spells. Assuming he is still... no, he will be there.”

“The other boyfriend, right?” Janna asked. “From the, um... air riders?”

“Air Raiders, yes,” Jackie clarified. “Which reminds me. I should get going. I’ll bring him here, then we can discuss the battle plan.”
The girl began to turn around, headed towards where Marco and Tom were talking. Hekapoo was sulking besides them, arms crossed in front of herself. The whole picture just reminded Janna why her original plan was to do this alone.

“Wait, Jackie,” Janna stopped her. “I am sorry, but there is one thing I want to test first, about your sword, and about the wand. Could you maybe send Marco to get him instead?”

Jackie hesitated.

“Um… sure. Let me tell him, then. I’ll be right back.”

----

If there was something that could lift Marco’s spirits right now, and it wasn’t a certainty that there was, it would be the chance to ride Nachos into the air once again. Finding out that Orel was alive and well would, of course, be a close second.

“So, Marco, who is this guy, really?” Tom asked, as soon as they were airborne and clear from the portal. Wind rushed through their hair as they flew out into the pre-dawn sky.

Janna hadn’t opened the stone wall she had used to seal them all inside the cave. Instead, she had asked Hekapoo to open a portal for them directly from within the buried chamber, with the other end opening high up in the air, just below the clouds, near enough to the supposed meeting point.

They had decided not to portal directly to their destination, nor right above it, just in case doing so would mean revealing their location to Midnight’s ambush party.

“He is Jackie’s boyfriend. He was her lieutenant with the Air Raiders too. He is a powerful mage, and an expert soldier,” Marco explained. “They’ve been working together for twelve-plus years.”

“Wow,” Tom whistled. “You must really hate this guy, uh?”

Marco was confused for a second. Until he realized that not everyone was like Jackie.

He chuckled. Did that mean he himself really was like Jackie now?

“Not at all, Tom,” he retorted. “Orel is a pretty great dude: selfless, compassionate, brave, handy to have on your side in a fight…”

“Has the biggest stick in the world up his ass,” Kar added, by way of a contrasting opinion.

Tom laughed.

The demon prince had volunteered to come with Marco. Partly because there was safety in numbers, and partly because Janna was busy talking to Jackie, and he had, in his own words, ‘had enough of hanging out with Hekapoo to last him the next century.’

“So you really don’t care that he fucks Jackie, do you?” Tom asked.

It was Marco’s turn to laugh. “Well, it would hardly be fair if I did. Plus, if there has to be some other guy she is seeing… then I guess it could be much worse than Orel.”

“Speak for yourself!” Kar grumbled.

“I did,” Marco pointed out. “You just don’t get a vote on this one.”
The monster arm grunted something unintelligible, but he obviously had no actual counterargument to that.

Ok, fine, there were three things that could brighten Marco’s mood: riding Nachos, finding out that Orel was safe, and getting one up in his banter with Kar!

“So, Marco…” Tom began. “About Star…”

And there, of course, was one thing that could darken his mood entirely, despite all that.

Fortunately, that conversation would have to wait.

“We are approaching the meet up point, Tom, hold on,” he announced.

The demon grasped Marco’s shoulder tighter, as Nachos began a gentle dive towards the meeting point. The dragoncycle pirouetted briefly, following Marco’s directions, executing the maneuvers that marked them as friendly to a potential ally watching from below.

There was nobody down there, nobody they could see among the relatively dense patch of dry underbrush around the agreed place. Then again, that was the whole idea. If Orel was down there, he would be able to see them instead. He should have been looking out for a flying object arriving from precisely this direction, executing precisely this flight pattern.

All they had to do was keep an eye open, scanning the area below for a response.

There it was!

A metallic glint reflected the sun from below, right towards them. Orel’s blade, signaling his position. It flashed a short code pattern to prove it was really him.

Marco looked around. The sky was clear. No clouds. No iron war unicorns either. He steered Nachos down one final time.

They landed close to the edge of the underbrush cover. Just as they did, Pearl and Sunbolt came out of it, and Orel besides both mounts.

He seemed alive and in one piece.

In fact, the mage was glowing. He was literally glowing, a faint golden light glimmering atop his bronze skin.

He smiled at Marco. He frowned slightly at Kar.

And then…

And then he saw Tom.

“Marco, wait, that’s an…” the demon prince began.

“I am your end, fiend!” cried Orel, his face contorting into a mask of fury.

The human boy never could have imagined that expression coming from the gentle and polite mage. Wouldn’t have believed it if you told him. Wouldn’t have been able to picture it, if he weren’t seeing it now.

Before Marco knew what was happening, the lieutenant of the Air Raiders had sprouted bright
wings made of white light from his back, his sword had turned into blinding lightning, and his charging form was right upon Tom.

“Never again shall I suffer your kind to live!” swore the man Marco had thought he knew.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was a nice little breather chapter, wasn’t it? Let’s see if the next one is anything like it…

**Coming up next:** Chapter 42: Torn Apart

… oh.
Torn Apart

Chapter Summary

In which heaven and hell collide, something precious is lost, and our heroes are much diminished.

Chapter Notes

This is either the most terribly inappropriate chapter for being the IStASE "Christmas Special" or, well, this being IStASE, a most horribly appropriate one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 42: Torn Apart

The nature of the mortal heart is turmoil. The nature of the mortal mind is confusion. To be mortal is to be lost, to be adrift, and so, to be able to find the way, once gone astray.

It is different for those not meant to wander. An arrow which veers from its course doesn’t magically find its way back. It doesn’t stop to figure out where it went wrong, either. It just hits whatever is in its new path.

A shooting star that goes off-track is not a spaceship. It can’t correct its course. It doesn’t even understand it’s lost. If it becomes a meteor and strikes the world, then that’s that. Celestial mechanics at work, nothing less and nothing more.

Angels are much the same.

Angel, from the greek angelos, meaning messenger. Messenger, from the latin mittere, ‘to send’. Like missive… or missile.

His kind were never wanderers. At their best, they were heralds and warriors. At their worst, they were weapons.

Orel flew towards the demon prince in front of him, towards his new target, intent on fulfilling his purpose. To do what he had failed to do with Midnight, many years ago. To repeat what he had accomplished against the demon swarm, just the night before.

He flew past Marco before the human’s eyes could follow him. He readied his white glowing blade before the fiend could raise his one remaining arm to defend himself.

He struck.

He missed.

“Orel, what the hell is going on!?” he heard Marco shout behind him.
As he processed his friend’s words, Orel tracked too the dragoncycle’s movements. It wasn’t Pearl. It wasn’t the mount of his knight captain, but another of her kind, green and muscular. An older specimen, perhaps. It had rushed to grab the demon, somehow lifting him on its back and taking flight before Orel could reach him in his righteous charge.

It didn’t matter. Dragoncycles were fast, sure, but they were fast like thunder was fast. If he put his all into it, Orel could be nearly as fast as lightning was fast. It might sound similar, but there really was no comparison.

“Well indeed is going on, Marco,” Orel replied in a calm voice. “That creature is a demon. Not just any demon, either. I sense in him the blood of the First Fallen, distant as it might be. That’s one of the rulers of hell!”

His eyes tracked the dragoncycle. It was circling them now. Was it worried about the human? It needn’t fear, Orel’s quarrel was not with him. Or did it simply know it wouldn’t be able to get away?

“Well, yeah, but…” Marco’s expression didn’t change. “Look, he is on our side. He can help! And besides, he is really not a bad guy…”

He seemed more shocked at Orel’s own transformation than at being told there was true fiend in their midst. Somehow, that… disquieted the angel. No, enough of euphemisms! It angered him.

Wasn’t it right and fine for him to be angry at someone he’d called a friend but found consorting with the enemy? And the capital-E Enemy at that!

“His kind is an affront against the multiverse,” Orel explained, in terms Marco would understand. “It’s not the who, but the what of what he is.”

How did the human not know that? In every dimension where mortals bred it should be common knowledge, in one form or another. It would have had been seeded into their culture: there were bad things, evil things born of betrayal, meant only to corrupt and destroy, and they looked just like… just like the purple runt hanging for dear life from the dragoncycle’s scales.

“And you?” Marco shouted at him. There was hurt in his voice. It was a hurt Orel had long expected, from him, and from Jackie, when the time came for him to no longer hide. “What are you?”

It was natural for the human to be confused, natural for him to be hurt. Orel had lied to them, after all, made them think he was closer to them than he was, than he could ever be. He really had wanted to be closer, and in doing so, he had lost his way. It had taken the battle against Midnight’s spell, against the swarm, to remind him of his nature, of his purpose.

He was an envoy of heavenly light, made to fight all that which was aberrant within creation. For nearly thirteen years, he had forsaken that duty, and grown frustrated and confused in turn. Last night he had fulfilled his purpose, and known only joy and certainty in the act of killing his foe.

“Isn’t it obvious, Marco?” Orel replied. “I am an angel.”

Marco looked at him with shock and incredulity, with pain in his gaze.

Orel sighed. It was only natural, after all. The nature of the mortal heart is turmoil. The nature of the mortal mind is confusion. To be mortal is to be lost.

As the being of light's thoughts fell with pity upon his erstwhile friend, Pearl, the Knight Captain's
white dragoncycle, took off behind him, seen but unnoticed.

---

“An… angel?” Marco repeated.

He was having a hard time processing the news. Then again, it wasn’t the strangest thing he’d ever heard. In fact, it probably didn’t count as the strangest thing he’d heard in the last twenty-four hours, come to think of it. He too had wondered, before, what the existence of someone like Tom - let alone someone like Sam - implied about the possibilities of what could be out there in the wide multiverse.

“Right now, you moved faster than I could see. I’ve never seen you move that fast, not even when riding Sunbolt,” Marco noted. He wasn’t asking, but Orel nodded to confirm his words. “And, back in the tunnels, you were confident that you could hold back that swarm spell…”

“I did not hold them, I vanquished them, Marco,” Orel said. It was not a boast, just a matter-of-fact admission, a mission report like the ones he would give Jackie before.

“The nuclear explosion…” The pieces began to fit together.

“I briefly brought the heavens unto the earth,” Orel conceded.

“And your healing magic…” Marco swallowed, remembering he owed his life to the mage. No, not a mage…

“Merely an echo of the divine,” the angel said, almost embarrassed. “It comes from beyond me, so do not focus your gratitude on me.”

Gratitude…? Yes, perhaps. But that wasn’t what Marco was thinking about, not when you put all those pieces together.

“Orel, tell me something,” Marco said quietly. He saw the other man’s eye still tracking the skies, making sure Tom didn’t flee during their conversation. “That night, back in the canyon, back in the base, the night of the ambush, could you… is there any chance you could have fought it off?”

There was a second of silence, and then something like regret in the calm voice of the former lieutenant of the Air Raiders.

“Yes, probably,” he admitted.

It was the kind of regretful tone with which one would confess to breaking a flowerpot, not to letting half a hundred of your friends die for no reason at all!

“Why…?”

He didn’t understand.

“Why didn’t you!?” Marco shouted, furious.

He involuntarily closed his left hand into a fist. As he opened it again, he considered starting a ritual. Then he thought better of it. Orel knew about the rituals, and he was superhumanly fast. He would just knock him down as soon as his hands even started the motions.

Or worse. After all, Marco knew nothing of this man.
“I didn’t want to reveal myself to you, or to Jackie,” Orel explained. “I thought that showing myself for what I am would have… separated me from her. I was right on that count, but wrong in my actions.”

“You can say that twice, you sanctimonious asshole!” growled a voice from Marco’s right. Kar had spent the entirety of the conversation trying not to draw the attention of the demon-murdering angel, and with good reason. Marco knew this meant he simply couldn’t hold back anymore. “You let fifty-nine people die because you thought stopping it would scare your girlfriend away!? How do you think she will feel once she knows that?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Orel retorted. “She… them… all of you… I don’t blame you but… it was a distraction from my mission.”

“Your mission?” Marco asked, trying to calm himself down enough to process the new information.

“I was sent to this domain fifty years ago, to stop the one you call Midnight,” Orel explained. “She is the result of an… aberration. At first, we thought the problem was contained. However, around seventy years ago, by the count of this world, the situation changed.”

Star’s deal with Wish. Midnight’s creation.

Did that make Wish themselves the aberration? After all, in a way, Midnight was the result of Wish. Or was Star’s casting the spell the aberration and Wish the result?

“Right. Bang up job you were doing stopping Midnight! Willingly letting the people who fought against her die!” Kar added, sarcastically.

“It’s not as if they would have made a difference,” Orel reasoned, in his defense. “The Knight Captain… I mean, Jackie Lynn Thomas, could have, perhaps. She is exceptional, and she was given an item of great power, even if the source of it is troubling…”

Sam’s crystal blade, Marco assumed.

“… but the others were… inconsequential,” the angel continued. “I’ve fought Midnight before. I did it as soon as I arrived to this world. I lost.”

Marco let the implications of that sink in. Given the way Orel had moved just now, when he wasn’t holding back, plus the stuff he claimed he had done down in the tunnels, the fact that Midnight was still stronger wasn’t good news.

“I made a mistake in letting those men and women die, Marco. I see that now,” the bronze skinned man with the wings made of white light confessed. “But it wasn’t because they would have been of any use in fighting Midnight. Quite the opposite, actually.”

Orel’s eyes darted across the sky. Marco followed them to see Nachos and Tom still circling around them.

“When I first lost, I was… shocked, adrift, in more ways than one. Midnight… broke me, turned me into my component particles and scattered me far and wide. It took me decades to reconstitute myself into this body. I feared another defeat might take me out of the gameboard entirely,” he confessed. “So, I concluded that I had to take a step back, find allies and comrades. That’s when I met Jackie. I thought, maybe, if there were others like her around, with weapons like her own, then maybe together we would stand a chance.”
There was bitterness to his smile then.

“Those others never came, of course.” He seemed to stare at his own fingers for a second, flexing them in front of his gaze. “Maybe you, a decade later, are the closest thing to that, Marco. Tainted by demons and willing to play with fire until it burns you to the core, but, still, able to hold your own.

“I made a mistake in letting the Air Raiders die, because in doing so I let the creatures Midnight created live,” Orel declared. “But, more than that, I made a mistake in letting my curiosity… no, my feelings for Jackie Lynn Thomas… exist. A decade without finding another like her, you see? I convinced myself she was special, precious.”

“She is,” Marco muttered.

“Right. For a mortal, she might well be,” Orel conceded. “I wanted to get close to her, and I did. But that closeness was predicated on a lie. A lie that drove me away from my mission. A lie that made me waver. I shouldn’t have pretended to be one of you. I shouldn’t have waited for allies that were never going to appear. I should have done my job!”

“Orel, Jackie wouldn’t have liked you any less looking like this, for showing your true self, for not being human, or ruman,” Marco explained, sadly. “But she would take exception to you letting her friends die. Or killing one of them.” He glanced upwards.

“Let Tom go,” he pleaded. “He is our friend. And he is an ally, just like you wanted. And we have others. We can all work together to fight Midnight, to complete your mission.”

He had wanted to add that they could be friends, that he and Jackie could maybe be together still, but after what Orel had admitted to, Marco honestly doubted either of those things were possible anymore. It was just that, maybe, they would still be able to at least work together.

“Being my true self is not just showing my wings and blade to you, Marco. If it were so simple, I’d have shown myself a decade ago,” the angel spoke. “It’s something else, something within my core self I had to suppress, to channel away, in order to pretend to be ruman.”

Orel’s phantasmagoric wings of light unfurled then and a bright golden glow overtook his eyes. He pointed at Nachos and Tom with the tip of his bright golden sword.

“Midnight is my mission, but fiends like him are my enemy, they are the result of an earlier and greater aberration. I should never have gone against my nature. I should never have stopped being what I am. Because I did so, I let rumans die and demons live. I’ll address that mistake now, and forever after.” He turned to look back at Marco. “And that includes you!”

Orel lunged towards the human. Or rather, towards his right hand, towards Kar’Margarach the demon.

Marco felt the monster arm tense and brace for battle, but the impact never came.

There was instead a demonic exclamation in some forgotten guttural language, and a black slab of rune-etched stone sprouted out of the ground, forming a barrier between the charging angel and Kar (and his attached human).

A pit of fire opened behind the barrier, and a dozen black chains emerged out of it and tangled themselves around the arms, legs, and neck of Orel the Heavenly Emissary. He struggled against the restraints, and they creaked and whined, but held. For now.
“Hey, demon kid. You are also a bit screwed up in the head, aren’t you?” Kar quipped. “That was your chance to get the hell away from here!”

“Well, you see,” Tom retorted, “that kind of thing has never been my strong suit.”

He glanced at his missing arm and threw them a cocky smile he really wasn’t feeling at all.

On the inside, he was focusing with literally all his might on fortifying the magical restraints he had summoned around the angel. Mephistopheles in a monocycle! A fucking angel. Here of all places!

Tom felt about angels roughly the way a large tuna might feel about great white sharks. In the grand cosmic food chain, it was an appropriate enough metaphor. Except, of course, sharks never felt they were morally obligated to hunt and kill tuna!

Did it really matter if he was twenty generations removed from some multiverse-splitting war? That his ancestors had been on the side of blasphemy there? Tom didn’t think so!

He demanded to be judged by his own actions and… well, those were certainly a mixed bag too, but still…

The angel’s skin glowed brighter than even the rising desert dawn around them. Tom’s chains weakened and corroded in a span of seconds. It was like watching a fast-forward of iron submerged in acid, up to an including the way small pieces of the metal bubbled upwards from the chains. Except that the corrosion came from the air around the celestial being, and the bubbles were thus going upwards into the sky.

By the Astray One! Tom was going to die here! It wouldn’t even be trying to get Star to see reason, either, or fighting alongside Janna to kill her. No, just a chance encounter with the multiverse’s apex predator. One he hadn’t even known was around a few minutes ago.

The chains fully neutralized, the hellish flames harmless against the angel’s skin, Orel turned up towards the demon prince. Instead of going again after Marco, or Kar, he unfurled his ethereal wings and took up flying in the direction of the hovering dragoncycle and her rider.

‘Hell save me!’ thought Tom

Surprisingly enough, it did.

The dragoncycle dived down like a blazing silver comet, slowing down only as it swept a few meters off from the ground. Jackie Lynn Thomas jumped down and rolled along the desert sand. She unsheathed the crystal blade, jumped to her feet, and took a quick inventory of the situation. In that order.

“Marco, what the hell just happened here?” she shouted at the human boy.

Her gaze had lingered on him only long enough to make sure he was unhurt. Then it had quickly scanned the charred black stone barrier before them. Now it was focused on her former lover flying up in the air without Sunbolt, and slashing with a glowing golden sword against the magical curtain of solid black smoke between him and Tom Lucitor.
“Jackie, I am so sorry… you are not going to like this, but…” the human boy began.

“Status report, Marco,” she barked at him. She didn’t have the time to be given roundabout tales.

She was ready to hear anything. She just needed to know what they were up against, stat.

“Orel is an angel. Always was. He wants Tom and Kar dead,” Marco informed her, crisply. “He won’t be talked down.”

What!? That didn’t make any sense. Orel, an angel? She’d known him for nearly thirteen years. That was impossible! Surely Marco was just confused and…

No.

Marco wouldn’t lie to her, and he wasn’t any more easily confused or deceived than Jackie herself would be, not about something like that. So, what he said was either the truth, or worth treating provisionally as the truth.

In fact, she appreciated Marco for having gotten her meaning, for giving her the raw tactical facts. She didn’t need to understand it all. She just needed to think of the next step, before anything worse happened.

“What are the chances he’ll listen to me?” she asked him, uncertain. It was worth asking. Orel and her were still far closer than he was to Marco, after all.

“Not good.”

Jackie nodded.

“He killed Star’s swarm spell,” Marco added. “And… Jackie, he could have saved Sigrun and the others. He just… didn’t.”

Oh.

Jackie felt the sword in her hand tremble, the magical glass that fed off her own willpower growing weaker at the shock of those words. She inhaled and focused. She forced herself to remain resolved, even if it was a resolve in the abstract, without any concrete plan backing it.

She just repeated the lie to herself: that she had been ready to hear anything.

----

The bat-winged woman looked apprehensively at the solid smoke cloud before her. It wasn’t the magical barrier that bothered her, of course, but the bright shimmering cuts that kept flashing through from the other side. The person on the other end… nah, the angel - ‘if it quacks like a duck’ and all that - was making his way through remarkably fast. The witch hadn’t expected anyone other than Star to be able to break through her wall of darkness, let alone this quickly.

“Janna!” Tom shouted, full of shocked, terrified, ‘I almost died and might have peed myself a little’ gratitude. To be honest, she knew the feeling.

“We need to run, now!” he added, frantic.

“He’d catch up to us way before we can reach the portal,” Janna noted.

It was true. At least, he could catch up to Tom before he could get to the portal, and she wasn’t
planning to leave the demon boy behind. Not that she was sure she could outrun the angel, either.

“I have a better idea,” she muttered, and pointed the replica wand directly at the cloud of smoke. The star in the middle of the stone scepter shone bright violet.

Well, it was probably good to field-test the damn thing anyways, before going against its creator. Janna just hoped she wouldn’t have to waste too much power killing this asshole.

“H… How did you know we were in trouble?” asked Tom, with impeccably shitty timing.

“Jackie’s dragoncycle,” she grunted. “Apparently Nachos here was able to communicate with her somehow, growls or body language or whatever. When we opened the extraction portal for the second rendezvous window, she came flying through instead of you two. We got the idea.”

The cuts were getting brighter and brighter. The barrier was about to burst.

3… 2… 1… What was it?

Oh, right!

“Glowing Darkness Hellblast!” she shouted as the smoke broke down.

Janna felt silly calling out her attacks like that. She never needed to do that with her own spells. Probably didn’t need to do it with the wand, either, but it helped her remember how Star’s spells looked, how they felt.

A thread-thin beam of blinding anti-violet emerged from the wand, just as Orel cut his final opening and emerged from the cloud barrier.

The spell missed.

In the blink of an eye the angel had teleported from right in front of the older woman, to right beside her. No. Not teleported. He really was that fast.

“What manner of creature are you?” the glowing man asked her. “You are tainted by the powers of hell, and hold Midnight’s talisman, but your soul and mind are mortal.”

“What? You want my life story?” she retorted. “Nah, I don’t think so. It’s long, shitty, and you seem to have it figured out the important bits just fine on your own.”

As she did it, she focused on the energies inside the wand, and pulled from it the forces of time and stasis.

“Oh, yes. I see. Perchance I did. In any case,” Orel pointed his sword right at her. “Stand aside from the demon, mortal, and I might…” he glanced at the wand, and at the leathery wings piercing through twin rips on the back of her cloak. “...might,” he emphasized, “let you live.”

“Yeah, no. You see, that’s not going to work,” Janna kept speaking, trying to buy time. Ironically, the spell was taking her a while to cast. “For three separate reasons, actually. One: that doesn’t sound like much of a promise on your end. Two: you are a goddamned prick! And, yes, I get the irony of an angel being a goddamned anything, but it’s not my fault that you are, indeed,” Buying. Time. “a goddamned prick!”

He looked at her, unconcerned by the insult. If anything, he seemed somehow disappointed in her.

“And the third reason?” Orel asked, once it became clear Janna was not going to continue talking.
“Right,” she added, as she finally completed the silent spell. “Well, the third problem with that is that it turns out that demon is my… uh… boyfriend? Ex-boyfriend from my teenage years? Future date prospect? Help me a bit here, Tom!”

She had to force herself to slowly go over every syllable of that last part, just to match the speed of everything that came before. Even then it came out too quick, sort of slurred out, like she was running her mouth in a panic. Good.

“Uh…” Tom replied, dumbly.

Orel darted after him, clearly dissatisfied with their conversation thus far. Well, who could blame him?

He was moving fast. Not quite speed-of-light fast, but she thought it might be in the neighborhood. Tom was fast too. Not nearly as fast, unfortunately, but fast enough for his eyes to widen in terror at what was to come. Under normal circumstances, Orel would have decapitated the demon prince before Janna even saw him twitch a muscle.

Fortunately, these weren’t normal circumstances anymore. While she ran her mouth to distract him, she had managed to cast her spell. Rather than try to match his speed, Janna had just slowed time around her to a crawl.

It was the kind of thing Star might have done. It meant drawing out a massive amount of power from the wand. Two, maybe three percent of the total reserves of the burning violet star core, all in a single spell. Then again, this was an emergency.

Seeing as how Orel was now, from her perspective, moving at close to normal speed, Janna had no trouble firing a bright green deadly ray right in front of him, cutting through his path. It probably wasn’t enough to harm him, even if he’d charged right into it. Thankfully, it did turn out to be enough to stop him in his tracks, taking the heat off from Tom, for now.

“How…?” Orel asked, confused, as he pulled back to avoid the beam of light. It was a brief confusion. “No. I see. That was clever, human. Very clever. I assume you are one of those other allies Marco was talking about? Such a waste.”

By way of a response, Janna fired another beam of green destructive energy at the angel. It hit him right in the chest, as he turned around to look at her. It bounced harmlessly off his golden-glowing skin.

He shrugged. “Is that all?”

Janna noticed then that Tom was also fighting back, or, well, trying to. While Orel and her exchanged words for blows, his singular arm had slowly become raised, pointing with an open palm towards where the angel stood.

To Janna, it had seemed painfully slow, until she realized Nachos’ wings hadn’t moved a single millimeter along their smooth flapping trajectory. Tom was moving fast, much faster than any human could, it just wasn’t even close to fast enough.

Flames sprouted out of Tom’s hand, flowing slowly, viscous like tar. Orel glanced at him with something like pity in his ancient angel eyes and flew a step backwards, out of the trajectory of the impossibly slow burst of fire.

Janna could feel his power, just like she had learned to feel the power inside trees and worms back in Echo Creek’s cemetery, a full lifetime ago. Orel’s inner core was bright. It was blistering. He
was the sort of sunlight that burns and disinfects, not the kind that warms and comforts. Not that Janna had ever gotten much comfort out of sunlight anyhow.

She could feel Tom too. She was surprised how small, how vulnerable, the demon prince felt to her now. She remembered the deep pool of shadows his energies had seemed like to her the first night she drew from him. Compared to the blinding angel, or to the true star in the center of the wand she was holding, or even to the infernal curse of ink that coiled around her own skin, he felt, almost… human.

He had saved her life twice before. First against Wish’s first aspect back before they set off for the City of Dis, when the fiery ghost had come after her. Then against Star’s misaimed spell on the silver stairs.

It was all up to her this time.

The witch raised a hand and summoned forth a lance of black magical ichor, making sure to draw from the center of the wand, rather than her own. She fired the spell at Orel. If a ray of energy hadn’t succeeded, then perhaps a more solid spell would.

She cursed herself silently as she saw that the shadowy spear moved sluggishly through the air, as if underwater.

The angel laughed as he moved out of the way again. “You seem new to this, human. Light is light, but just because time around you runs in your favor, it doesn’t mean it does the same around your magics.”

Angry, Janna doubled down. She repeated the spell. Again and again she created shadowy lances and set them on separate trajectories all around Orel. They might not move as fast as he did, but if she was able to place them just right, to cover every possible route he had left to avoid them…

The question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, it turns out, would remain unanswered. What Orel demonstrated, grinning, was that it took just one to dance effortlessly around a hundred magical needles.

Not one of Janna’s attacks connected, and every time she thought she had left him without a place to run, the man with the translucent wings would find a path through the projectile storm just in the nick of time. What was worse, he didn’t seem to be making his way towards her. Or towards Tom. He just stood there, nearly in place, avoiding her barrage of spells, mocking her.

“You…” Janna huffed, out of breath. “Y… you are enjoying this!??”

Orel frowned for a second.

“Yes, I suppose I am.” The calm smile returned to his lips. “Nothing wrong with that as long as I finish the job, I think. And perhaps, if I can convince you to turn towards the path of the righteous…”

Janna extended both hands and let go of a powerful lighting storm through the tips of her fingers, drawing liberally from the wand.

The forking beams of electricity sparked and creaked as they made immediate contact with Orel’s body. Well, not immediate. She could see the spell advance, sort of, it wasn’t the speed of light, not even close, but the speed of an electric cascade was pretty damn fast too, fast enough to catch an arrogant angel by surprise!
Unfortunately, it wasn’t nearly strong enough to truly injure him. He winced briefly, then shrugged it off.

“Alright, perhaps I cannot,” he noted, sounding disappointed.

With a powerful - if possibly symbolic - motion of his immaterial wings, Orel flew up, breaking clear of her magical lightning storm. He ascended towards the sky like a comet for a few seconds (or what to Janna felt like seconds in her own stretched time), then did a sharp turn around in mid air, and dived towards her, blade-point first. A deadly projectile.

Janna smiled.

That was her chance!

She pointed the center of the wand upwards, directly towards the charging angel.

He did not veer from his course, just continued to head straight towards her.

And why wouldn’t he? He had effortlessly withstood everything she had hit him with so far. So, Janna concluded, he wouldn’t dodge out of the way just because she was taking aim at him. And, if he thought any better of it once he saw the beam of the spell, well, like he’d said: light was light. It always moved the same.

So, how did Star do it?

“I call the darkness unto me, from deepest depths of earth and sea…” intoned Janna.

The wand of her enemy, a deep well of magical power.

“...from ancient evils unawoken, to break the one who can’t be broken.”

The angel, falling sword-first towards her, like a meteor.

“To blackest night I pledge my soul, and crush my heart to burning coal…”

The demon prince behind her, which she was pretty sure she loved.

“…to summon forth the deathly power, to see my HATED FOE DEVOURED!”

Star, Midnight, somewhere out there, probably laughing at her.

Janna saw the sky darken and the black beam of pure death emerge from the center of the wand. She saw, with pleasure, the eyes of the arrogant winged man before her open wide in fear. She felt, with regret, how an unimaginable amount of power drained away from the wand, significantly diminishing their last and best hope for defeating Star.

The beam flew up. The angel dove down. There was an explosion.

By the time Janna figured out what happened, she was staring face to face with Orel, eyes gleaming pure gold, his expression a rictus of vengeful fury. His right arm had closed around her throat. His left was crushing her own right wrist.

He tore the stone wand out from her hand.

“You were right,” he spat. “I was enjoying myself way too much.”
Then it all finally caught up to her. The spell had hit Orel’s sword. No, he’d angled the sword to catch the spell, and then immediately let go of it. The darkness of Star’s deadliest spell had consumed the angel’s incandescently bright weapon, but in doing so, it had missed its real target.

And now…

Orel threw the wand up into the air. Her last reservoir of magic! He threw it upwards with all his heavenly strength.

As it ascended, the stone wand cracked and crumbled to dust. The violet star turned red again and kept on flying up towards the sky. Janna knew it wasn’t coming back down.

Orel was simply returning to the heavens that which from the heavens had come.

It almost would have been poetic, if it didn’t mean they were all finished. Orel had won against her and Tom, and by his actions Star had in turn triumphed over everyone, him included.

There was sixty percent, maybe more, of its original power left in the star that had been the wand’s core. They needed it. She needed it. To fight Star. To save her parents, and Earth, and - more immediately - Tom.

“No!” Janna cried. “You ca… agghkh!”

The air left her lungs as Orel punched her stomach. He threw her back towards the ground after that. He did so off-hand, without force, as if she were just trash being discarded. Without the wand, maybe she was.

Janna was nearly knocked unconscious as she impacted the desert sand. Perhaps, it would have been better if she had been.

“Tom…”

----

It had happened so quickly. Orel had cut through Janna’s barrier spell and then, before Jackie could even blink, he was past her. They exchanged some words she couldn’t hear, and suddenly they were both moving like flashes in the dawn sky.

Jackie’s eyes, used to tracking the rushed chaos of aerial battle, couldn’t follow their movements at all. Whatever it was, it was over in a second. There was a rumble, an explosion of dark clouds, and then, a moment later, Orel had Janna by the neck. He took the wand from her and launched it towards the sun, then threw the older woman unceremoniously against the ground.

“Orel, stop!” Jackie cried, too late for it to matter.

The angel turned his gaze down towards the ground, meeting her eyes with his.

“My knight captain?” There was surprise in his voice, and she realized he had just noticed her presence.

Jackie was sure she hadn’t taken her eyes off of him, she hadn’t even blinked, but the next thing she knew, Orel, her former lieutenant, her lover, was right in front of her, arm’s-length away, smiling.

“I am glad to see with my own two eyes that you are alright, my knight captain,” he said, in that
soothing reassuring voice of his, as if everything else around them was nothing but a bad dream.

His eyes were dark and human now, no more golden and alien. Only the wings of white light distinguished this person from the man she’d grown to love.

“I… I am glad you are ok too, Orel,” she said. It was true, in a way. “But… what’s going on? What are you doing?”

“What I should have never stopped doing, what I swore to you too I’d do: fight Midnight, fight her spells, fight evil wherever I should find it,” he answered. “I let myself be distracted, but you, you of all people… maybe you can understand?”

She did. That was the problem, she did.

Orel had told her before just what kind of emotions he couldn’t afford to feel, what sentiments his magic should never be fueled by. She just hadn’t thought it would go this way. She had thought he’d lose his powers, his advantage, like she would if she faltered and Sam’s sword broke. She didn’t think he’d lose himself to them.

He was full of anger, behind the tranquil facade. Jackie could tell. Full of hate. Not at Tom, though, but at himself.

“Marco said…” Jackie began. She paused.

She walked a step forward. She placed her left hand on the man’s right cheek.

“He said you could have saved the Air Raiders, three days ago,” she told him. “Is that true?”

Orel nodded.

Behind him, Jackie could see Nachos and Tom flying down to check on Janna, trying not to draw attention as they mounted her onto the dragoncycle too.

“Why?” Jackie asked.

“I… it would have meant revealing myself,” the angel said. “I hid it for thirteen years. I realize now that was a mistake.”

“So, Gwendolyn? Adalheidis? Kara? Ythul? You could have saved them too?” she pressed on.

“My kni… Jackie. You must understand, every day since I failed to defeat Midnight, I’ve let at least a dozen people die by her direct action and that of her spells alone. Over the last thirteen years, counting only since I became conscious again…” Orel stopped, unable to say it.

Twelve times thirteen was just over one-hundred and fifty. Times about three hundred fifty…

“…fifty thousand,” she approximated for him.

It was a maddening number. Still, to fail to save fifty-nine… no, close to a hundred, when you could…

“I am not asking for you to forgive me,” he added. “But, perhaps, you can understand?”

She did.

“Shhh,” she whispered and leaned forward to kiss the man she’d loved.
As quickly, as suddenly as she could muster, she drove the point of her invincible crystal sword right into the angel’s heart.

Or, rather, where his heart ought to have been.

Orel was back in the air again, well beyond her reach, and she hadn’t seen him move. The blade encountered only empty air.

“Just so you know, Jackie,” Orel spoke, his eyes glowing orbs of gold. “What you tried to do just now? I do understand it, and I do forgive you.”

And with that magnanimous declaration, he flashed out of her sight again.

Next thing Jackie knew, Nachos had been thrown rolling into the sand, and Orel was standing just a few feet away from Janna, grasping Tom’s neck with his right hand.

----

The last few hours of relative time had been madness for the witch. Janna, still working inside her own bubble of accelerated time, could see the entire conversation between Jackie and the angel unfold in excruciating slow motion.

She could see Tom flying towards her, advancing millimeters at a time. If she thought it could have made any difference, she would have told him to flee, to save himself. She was fine. She just didn’t know if she had any moves left.

Marco might have well been a stone statue for all he factored into this battle now.

Even at her current speed, even seemingly ‘distracted’ as he was with his heart to heart with Jackie, Orel would not fail to notice Janna move, whether to attack him or to run away. Besides, even if she personally still had maybe a one in a million chance of being able to escape, there was no way she could take any of those slowpokes with her.

What was worse, she didn’t have the wand anymore. She had no source of magic she could use to fight back or make the others move faster. She didn’t even know how long the time dilation would keep working for her.

She did try draining power from Orel himself. Hell, she tried to dig her magical claws into Sam’s blade too, and into every source of energy she could think off in this forsaken world. But the ones she could access - including Tom - weren’t nearly enough, and she could not pull a single ray of power from either the angel or the infernal blade.

So, she was left there to observe Jackie’s plan fail in slow motion. She was left to think, to remember.

She remembered an empty parking lot, and a hearse pulled by an undead horse. She remembered Tom, fuming, naked, coming back from ‘comforting’ Star under the moonlight, walking into her web of plots and feints.

She remembered hell, and a lovely dinner, and a drinking game, and a night of passion with the demon prince who thought he was using her to get back at her ex.

She remembered an urn, and a mistake, and a lovely punishment.

She remembered days in hell, and the letter that would set her on the path that would change - and
She remembered the vampire bitch.

She remembered the lizard monster made of fire.

She remembered being betrayed and cheated on, and she remembered being saved from death at a terrible cost, by the same person.

She remembered that chance Sam gave her to end this all early, and how proud she had felt of her own foolish morals when she didn’t take it.

She remembered a decade of fighting Star and a half-century of hiding from her underground.

But, more than anything, she remembered Tom. Their bantering and their bickering, their sex and their conversations. The taste of his lips, the feeling of his slaps, the fire in his eyes. The way he had asked her to go out again, the way he cared for her even back before he was willing to say it.

He had saved her life twice, so she ought to have owed it to him to save his. But it wasn’t even about that anymore. It wasn’t about deals and what was owed, or what was fair. Janna wanted Tom to live, no matter what.

She had one source of magic left, of course.

So, when Jackie’s plan predictably went south, when she saw Orel launch himself towards Tom, elbow a slow-flying Nachos’ out of the way, throw her back to the ground, and begin to strangle the demon prince. Well, by that point, she had more than made up her mind.

‘Sam, if you are listening,’ and, well, of course he was, the sadistic son of a bitch. ‘Don’t you dare fucking shortchange me now!’

Janna extended her hand towards the scene in front of her. She felt her skin crawl as the tattoo slithered over her. She felt, or imagined, the head of the snake raise up over her left breast, preparing to strike.

“Hey, angel!” she shouted, eyes only on her target.

Orel turned around, without letting go of Tom.

“Fucking go to hell!”

For a second, she was worried warning her foe had been a mistake. Strike first, deliver the speech second. It was a basic rule!

She needn’t have worried.

What happened next was… horrifying.

She wasn’t sure what Jackie, or Marco, or even Tom, saw in that moment, but to Janna it was clear as day. There wasn’t a burst of fire, or a beam of deadly darkness, nothing so flashy. Instead, there was the place Orel had just been at, and then nothing in it.

Not empty air, either, nor even the void of space. There was nothing! Like if someone had cut out the shape of a winged man out of the multiverse and left the flapping edges to dance in the wind of whatever was behind space, behind the curtain of reality.
Except the hole was in full three dimensions and what was behind was…

Janna didn’t have the words for it. Didn’t want to ever learn them!

She was infinitely relieved when reality poured back in to fill the hole, and Tom fell to the ground, surprised, but unharmed.

She smiled at him. He looked at her, confused. She realized then that time was no longer flowing different for her than for him.

When the snake bit into her heart, it did so at the speed of any plain old viper. The vital organ’s last few beats were just about normal for the amount of stress she was under and, when her breath stopped, she technically still had a full six minutes left before her brain failed forever.

None of that mattered, of course, because before she could even go properly unconscious, she began to disintegrate. Her outstretched hand was the first to turn coal black and then ashen white. Her fingers crumbled and fell to the ground like a burned cigar, then her wrist, then up to her elbow.

Tom looked horrified.

She tried to grin to reassure him - it really didn’t hurt as bad as it ought to, honestly! - but that was when her jaw turned to dust and fell to the ground as well.

The image before her dissolved into nothing as her eyes crumbled away.

Then there was only darkness.

And between darkness and nothing at all, between being and not being, there was a single familiar voice.

“Well, J-flame? How did it feel? To be the most powerful one around, to be the one burning bright?” it mocked her. “Was it all you were hoping it would be?”

“Fuck off, Sam.”

----

“Marco…” Tom’s voice was weak, distant. His eyes unfocused. “Janna was a bad person. Wasn’t she?”

Marco wasn’t sure he understood. He wasn’t sure he understood much at all. He held onto Jackie, who had sheathed her blade, and thus was allowed to cry. She did so silently, without fuss. She wasn’t the only one.

“She was a liar, and a manipulator,” Tom declared. He walked slowly, unsteadily, towards the small spot of white fine powder in a sea of red and yellow sand dunes.

Marco didn’t say anything. He didn’t know if saying anything was expected of him. He didn’t think so.

He had lost two friends that morning, one old and one new. Jackie and Tom had lost the people they loved. Was that worse? Or merely different? The former, probably.

The demon prince knelt over the tiny mound of pale ashes left over the sand. “She stole from me before. She was greedy and vengeful. She defined herself by jealousy and envy, mostly of her best
friend. That’s at least three cardinal sins, maybe four. She was planning to murder her, too.”

Tom’s only hand began playing with the ashes, running his finger over them, painting shallow circles across Janna’s mortal remains.

“And she did murder an angel, I guess…” Tom added, sounding very uncertain.

He rubbed his index and thumb together, allowing the ashes in his fingertip to fall back into the pile.

“S… self-defense,” Jackie muttered, fists clenched, eyes glued to the ground.

Kar had retreated inside Marco’s arm, allowing him to run a dry soft human hand over his girlfriend’s hair. She allowed herself to be comforted.

“Plus, she made a deal with the devil. No,” Tom corrected himself, seemingly ignoring Jackie’s remark. “She made two.”

He began scooping up Janna’s ashes again, then letting them fall upon the ground once more.

His eyes went red, and for a moment Marco thought he was going to throw a fireball at the ashen mound, or at Jackie, or at him. Instead, he began muttering something in that strange demon tongue he sometimes used for casting spells.

A pit of fire opened up, clear of the ashes. This time, instead of chains, a single earthen vase emerged out of it. Tom snatched it from mid air.

“One act of sacrifice does not a selfish life redeem,” he muttered to himself, as he deposited the vase gently on the sand.

He began scooping Janna’s burned up remains into the urn. “So, like, you two agree with me, right? She was a bad person?”

“I… Tom…” Marco wasn’t sure what to tell him. “She had good reasons for some of that stuff. And the rest, well… it wasn’t that…”

“No, Marco!” the demon yelled at him. Glowing scarlet eyes glared blazes at the human boy. Steam rose up from his face as the heat evaporated his own tears. “She was a bad person! She has to be!

“Because… because…” He inhaled sharply, drawing in some of the snot that kept flowing from his nostrils. “Because bad people go to hell. And if she… if she is down there, anywhere down there… then I just have to find her.”

“Tom…” Marco didn’t know what to say.

The demon prince finished scooping up the ashes and closed the urn. He looked up at the sky, then down at the ground. He seemed to wait for a moment. Marco realized, after a while, that he was counting, calming himself down, if only a little bit.

“Hell is a big place,” Tom noted. “But I already know where to start.”

He began walking away from the two humans and their dragoncycles, carrying Janna’s vase with him.

“Do you know how to get back there?” It was Jackie asking.
“No. Do you?” Tom retorted, still showing his back to them.

She made no reply.

The demon prince just resumed marching out into the desert. Slowly but without stopping, he walked away.

“Wait, Tom!” Marco called out. “What about Star?”

“What about her?” the demon retorted without enthusiasm.

“I mean, we still need to find her, to… confront her, or to figure out how to get through to her,” he reminded him. “Aren’t you going to help us?”

“No, Marco. I don’t believe I will.”

Chapter End Notes

*On the first day of Christmas, APW gave to me,*
*the first major death since Part threeeeeee!*

And now that we have resolved the situation with this romantic romp’s B-couple, let us get back to our main trio… ;)

Next up: Chapter 43: The Eleventh Hour
The Eleventh Hour

Chapter Summary

In which rifts keep deepening, familiar places are found in an unfamiliar land, and in the end all comes down to three.

Chapter Notes

Fun fact, this was going to be the actual 11th chapter in Part IV, until the ‘meeting Jackie’ chapter got split in two. Don’t worry, the title still fits.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 43: The Eleventh Hour

Marco crossed the portal last, flying atop Nachos, following Jackie and Pearl. He was the last of only two. Four, if you counted the two dragoncycles.

Sunbolt wasn’t with them. He too had taken off in between Orel and Janna dying and Tom deserting the group. The griffon was loyal to its master to the end, and would not stay with the people who had fought and killed him. With noble animal sadness in its huge cat-like eyes, without growling at them or showing any aggression, the winged panther had taken its silent leave. Maybe it too understood the kind of senseless tragedy that had just transpired.

They hadn’t bothered to try and follow.

“Where is dumbo?” asked Hekapoo, as soon as it became clear no one else was following after them through the swirling vortex.

No answer.

“What about the witch lady?” the pintsize goddess added, false imperiousness cracking in a note of fear.

“She is dead,” Jackie managed to say before Marco could spit out the words. Even after all that, the former Knight Captain was still standing strong. Marco couldn’t imagine how. “Orel too. Tom left us. We are on our own.”

Marco half expected Hekapoo to throw a fit over those news, to break down, to start bawling at them. Instead, she nodded in understanding, glanced down, and chuckled.

“Can’t leave our friends on their own,’ he said. ‘Strength in numbers,’ he said. Ha! Well, thanks for nothing, dum-dum,” she muttered in a tone that tried to be mocking, but somehow sounded mournful instead.

“So…” Marco tried, feeling exhausted. “What now?”
It was an open question, but he had expected Hekapoo to answer. Child or no child, she was the Forger of Scissors, she was a member of the Magic High Commission, she was the one to explain, according to his dream. Now that Janna was gone, she had to be the one to guide them, no?

Hekapoo looked down at the floor and said nothing.

Jackie answered instead. “I guess now we take a rest, and then go take the fight to Star, just like Janna was planning to.”

She had just dismounted Pearl. In the light of Hekapoo’s flame, she looked wretched… and grimly determined.

“But, Jackie… the wand… and Janna… and Tom… and…” Even in his incoherent mutterings, Marco had enough sense not to mention Orel. “What can the three of us do, without them?”

Maybe what they could do was to reason with Midnight, to try and break Star free of their grip. But even Marco wasn’t too hopeful of that plan, and he knew that was not what Jackie intended.

“Hekapoo can open a portal there,” the girl pointed out. “If there is air, then great. If not, maybe we can lure Star out. You can try and distract her, and maybe, just maybe, I can still run her down with this thing.” She patted the nacre scabbard and the crystal sword within. “Look, I am not saying it’s a great plan. It’s just, well, we don’t have many other options.”

Marco didn’t follow. “But, wouldn’t it be better to try and get help? We can go find somebody else, and…”

Also, he still wasn’t sure he was on board with Jackie killing Star.

“Somebody else? Like who?” she retorted.

He had no answer ready. “I don’t know, but… there has to be someone. A few days ago we didn’t even know that Janna was in here, or that Tom was alive. There must be others who oppose Midnight. If we can get them together…”

He stopped himself, when he realized what he was saying, and to who.

“Marco, I spent thirteen years trying to get others together to fight Star, building an army,” Jackie reminded him. “You saw how that turned out. I got everyone who trusted me killed, except for the one who turned out to be a monster…”

She seemed to realize something then. “I guess there is a big chance I am getting you two killed too. I… I am sorry.”

“Jackie, what happened to Star is my fault more than it’s yours,” Marco noted, his tone calm and steady. “If someone put everyone in danger it’s me.”

“Pfft! Enough with the pity-fest dum-dums!” Hekapoo interrupted. “This whole thing is MHC business anyways. If anyone messed up, it was me. Old me, I mean.”

Marco wasn’t sure how to respond to that. On the one hand, Hekapoo had done all she could against impossible odds, and lost her life - sort of - in the process. Who had the right to ask her for more? On the other, it was hard to argue that the brunt of the responsibility for fighting something like Wish should have fallen on three kids, rather than the five immortal beings tasked with administering time and space and dimensional travel.
Wait! That gave Marco an idea.

“How about allies outside this dimension?” he pointed out. “Hekapoo, are you one-hundred percent sure you can’t portal out back to Mewni or somewhere else outside Midnight’s control? Or, failing that, is there any way to send messages out? Reach whatever is left of the High Commission?”

Who was left? Rhombulus? Lekmet?

“I can’t do either of those things.” She glanced meaningfully at her safety magical scissors. “Also, I wouldn’t if I could.”

“Uh? Why?” Marco and Jackie asked, almost in unison.

“Someone is already coming. They consider the MHC to have already failed, so the responsibility has moved further up in the chain. Time is long here, so it doesn’t matter, we have time to plan and try to fix things on our own, but the moment we step out there?” Hekapoo winced. “We’d have ten, fifteen minutes max.”

“Wait. Someone is coming?” Marco asked. It didn’t sound like help, though. It sounded like…

Jackie looked right at the diminutive Forger of Scissors, and made the natural guess, “Sam.”

Hekapoo nodded.

“If we take more than fifteen minutes,” Jackie continued, staring at the fiery child for any sign that she was getting it right, or wrong, “then he’ll consider us as having failed to stop Wish. So he will do it himself. He will burn this place, and Earth, to the ground. Won’t he?”

“Worse than that,” Hekapoo admitted. “But close enough.”

Fifteen minutes outside were over thirty years in here, of course. It wasn’t exactly a ticking clock. It did mean, however, that help wasn’t coming.

Quite the opposite, really.

As for help from within Hekapoo’s domain, well, it had taken thirteen years for Jackie to recruit and train the Air Raiders and, as Orel himself pointed out, they hadn’t ever actually stood a chance against Midnight. Plus, there was no way Jackie could possibly survive going through it all a second time, anyway.

“Besides, we don’t know how long Janna’s hiding spell will remain active,” Jackie added, waving her hand through the strange glimmering fog still inside the cave. The faster she moved it, the more translucent it became, slowly recovering some of its substance once at rest. “I bet it’s not meant to give us another thirteen years.”

“No, probably not,” agreed Hekapoo. “Look, confronting meanie directly is stupid, and it’s going to get us all killed…” She sighed. “It’s also the best plan we got. So, whatever, let’s do it.”

The alternative, left unsaid, was to wait for Midnight to ambush them here once Janna’s spell ended, or to spend the next thirty years fleeing from her only to die at Sam’s hands instead. If they could even last that long.

“Well, it seems we have no choice,” Marco admitted.

----
They didn’t try opening the portal immediately. In fact, once it became clear that the hiding spell had survived its creator, at least in the short term, the three of them decided to settle in for the day. Jackie still had enough salted sleipnirian goat meat for herself and Marco, and Hekapoo didn’t really seem to need to eat.

None of them was really in a rush to go on what by all estimations was a clear suicide mission. But, more than that, they all needed to digest what had just happened out there. Even Hekapoo.

Jackie had, perhaps, the most to digest.

Was it her error in judgement that had cost them the war? Her trust in Orel? But how, even in thirteen years of knowing him, could she have imagined this? Had there been signs she missed? Was it even worth it now, in retrospect, to look for them? And, his life having ended the way it did, should she mourn the man she loved, or hate the angel that deceived her?

The human girl took some solace in the fact that she hardly had time for either. In the end, she had others, more deserving, who she ought to mourn, and a far greater evil, still living, on which to focus her hate.

“Jackie, I’ve been thinking about what to do,” Marco whispered in her ear. “You know… about Star.”

It was clear he had meant to say something for a while. His voice was full of pause and apprehension. She felt his arm, which had a moment earlier been reaching around to hold her, going slack, giving her a chance to move away, if she so wished. He was giving her a final out from a long-delayed, and long-dreaded, discussion. Instead, she took his hand between both of her own and squeezed tightly.

They were lying together in the dark enclosed cave, quietly until now, his larger body wrapped around her own. They were clothed. Hadn’t dared to do otherwise. Not after what happened the last time, not while the link could still be active. They wouldn’t risk making love, even on what could easily be their last night alive.

Still, the least the could do was huddle together.

“Marco, I know this is hard. Maybe even harder for you than it is for me.” It was plenty enough hard for her too. “But I need you to help me. Without Janna around anymore, I…”

She felt his other hand running over her hair, trying to reassure her even as he himself tensed up behind her. She pulled the hand she was still cradling between her own even closer to her chest.

“I wish it didn’t have to be this way Marco,” Jackie continued. “But, without Janna, without Orel, without Tom… Look, I don’t need you to do it. I will. But I need you to help me out, to distract her. And we need to be one-hundred percent focused on stopping her, not on some fantasy about what could have been.”

There was no response for a few seconds, then, quietly, “and what if it isn’t a fantasy?”

Jackie sighed. It was. Marco had to know by now that it was.

“Marco, I am not sure we can beat her even if we are trying to win.” It was, right now, her biggest fear. Even dying in the process was secondary to what it would mean for this world - and theirs - to leave Midnight alive and active. “Can we really afford to hesitate? Is it reasonable to even try to save a single person when she is killing dozens every day, when millions are on the line just inside Hekapoo’s domain? Not to mention the billions back on Earth which Wish or Sam could kill if this
continues."

And, just in case that didn’t quite sink in…

“I killed Silence, remember? She was entirely innocent. I didn’t try to save her, couldn’t afford to. What does it say about me, about us, if we take that risk for Star?”

Marco didn’t respond for a while. He kept running his hand over her hair, but did so a bit too softly, a bit too hesitantly, like a nervous recruit petting a griffon for the first time, rather than a lover caressing another.

“Maybe we should have tried to save her too,” he ventured finally, with equal care.

“Yeah, maybe,” Jackie agreed, sadly.

After all, they didn’t have Janna or the fake wand anymore, so, in a way, hadn’t Silence death been for nothing?

She turned around to face her boyfriend, to look at him square in the eyes. “But Star is different, Marco. Midnight is different. You’ve not been here as long as I have, you haven’t seen…”

Fifty-nine. All dead.

“No, you have seen enough to understand, actually,” she corrected herself. She was not giving him a free pass there. “Midnight is a monster. She deserves to die! You should know that!”

Jackie didn’t even realize when she had stopped whispering and started yelling.

Marco let go of her. He frowned.

“Look, Jackie, I get it, ok? I am not an idiot. Star has done some truly awful things, but…” He trailed off. “But she did them for us. She became a monster to save our lives! And, before that, she lost her mom, and then some ancient horror we still can’t wrap our heads around spent years stalking her and toying with her, all the way since back in Echo Creek. So, I keep thinking… did she ever stand a chance? Did she really have a choice in any of this?”

“Do we?” she asked back.

“We…” Marco halted himself. “I don’t know. But maybe we should be looking for one.”

“And, while we do, how many more will die?” Jackie protested, incredulous that Marco would go to such lengths to defend their former friend. “You said it yourself: she did this because of us. If we don’t stop her, then aren’t we also to blame for what happens to everyone in this dimension? How about what happens after? If she goes to Mewni? If she goes to Earth?”

He wasn’t entirely wrong. Star was, in a way, as much a victim as anyone else. But that was the wrong way to think about it. She was a danger to others, to so many others, and if the two of them had a chance to stop her, then it would be vile not to take it.

“Don’t you get it, Marco? This is bigger than you or I. It certainly isn’t about Star as we knew her. We simply can’t afford to let her live!”

Jackie had shouted the last part at him. It echoed through the cave. Hekapoo, sitting on the far end from them, pretended not to hear.

Marco blinked.
“Can’t afford to let her live’?” he repeated, far more quietly. “‘She is a monster’? ‘She deserves to die’? You sound like Orel now, Jackie. You saw where that led him!”

“Marco… that was fucking low,” she muttered, pulling even further away from him, sitting up.

She was alone, she realized.

Janna was dead, Tom was gone, Hekapoo too afraid, and Marco way too soft.

Maybe she ought to give up as well? Wasn’t this madness? To march on Midnight with no allies and no one she could trust?

She glanced at the nacre scabbard, propped along the cavern wall, and the crystal blade within. ‘Nothing shall break it as long as you have the will to continue to wield it,’ was what Sam had said. No. She couldn’t give up.

“Jackie…” Marco reached out, tentatively, with one hand. He was also sitting now, a few steps away from her. Gently but firmly, she brushed aside the arm he offered. There was a pause before he spoke again. “I am sorry. That’s not… I didn’t mean it like that.”

“How did you mean it, then, Marco?” Jackie asked, annoyed.

“It’s like, well… you know: the first time I came here, those sixteen years? This place made me so harsh and so cold inside that Hekapoo had to mess with my memories to even give me a chance to be a normal kid again,” he explained. “And then, when I met you here, well, I saw that version of myself in you too, Jackie. And it’s only gotten worse. The ambush, Orel, Silence…”

“She thanked me for killing her, Marco.”

A short pause. “Yeah, I imagine she did. It’s just, I mean, when you say it like that, so calmly, like it is a normal thing to say… Jackie, I just don’t want you to go through that again, to grow even colder.”

Jackie blinked, not knowing whether to feel cared for, or just insulted.

“I don’t want us to kill Star, and I am not sure I can stop trying to find another way, a better solution… But, even more than that, I don’t want you to have to kill her. If it comes to that, well…” He took a deep breath. “I’ll do it.”

She took in the words; the value of what he was offering her, what it meant for him to say it. She shook her head.

“We can’t afford to do that, Marco, I am sorry,” she said. “I can’t give you the time to try to reason with her first, and I can’t afford to hesitate because you don’t want me to live with that in my conscience or whatever. I have enough deaths weighting in there already anyway, and many more if we fail.”

His eyes were full of sadness as she spoke. She hated that that was her answer.

“I appreciate the concern, Marco, I really do. But if I have a chance to stop her, I’ll take it, and if you have the chance… then you should take it. I don’t want you to be the one to do it either, but, well, this is bigger than us. You understand that, right?”

Marco nodded.
“And, Marco, remember how a long time ago I told you that you didn’t have to choose between me and Star?” she asked. “Well, I mean, I am sorry, but I really couldn’t have accounted for… this.”

“I know, Jackie.” She thought she could almost see a smile even in the darkness of the cave. “This isn’t anything like that.”

She wasn’t so sure.

“Marco, I need you to choose. I need you to have my back.”

“Ok, sure. You are right, Jackie. I will.”

She wasn’t sure whether or not she had imagined a small pause, a second of hesitation. But it didn’t matter. Either she could count on him, or she could not. Either they could beat Midnight, or they could not. She just had to take every opportunity, with or without Marco.

As for growing colder, the knight captain would let her heart become a glacier if that meant avenging her men, if that meant saving lives, whether Marco was happy about it or not.

----

There was air on the other side of the portal.

That had been the good news. It meant they didn’t have to come up with a way to lure Star to them. It meant that, when Marco pushed Kar through the opening, the demon hadn’t returned to them swollen from the vacuum exposure, or frozen in the coldness of space.

Sure, he had said that he wouldn’t be hurt, either way, that he was made of tougher stuff than the two humans were. That was true, to a point, and thus the reason they had eventually gone along with his plan. Still, Marco knew all too well that Kar tended to exaggerate his own resilience.

In the end, in this case, he really needn’t have worried.

“Well, there is air. Hell, it’s actually fresher out there than inside this fucking cave, let me tell you!” Kar had declared as soon as Marco pulled back his right arm from inside the portal. “It’s been… what? Three days since either of you two stinking mammals took a bath?”

Both humans were used enough to Kar not to pay that comment much mind. Sure, he wasn’t wrong, exactly. But, then again, the demon used to eat people’s bowels, for goodness sake! It was hard to imagine he would really be that picky about smells.

Still, he liked being a jerk, and he liked running his mouth, particularly when, well… when he was nervous.

“You are still not going to like it over there, though.” Kar added, a touch more quietly.

That, it would turn out, was the bad news: what was waiting for them on the other end. The view Kar then described to them.

Still, even knowing that, Jackie and Marco flew in through the portal soon after, each atop their own dragoncycle. Hekapoo was riding in front of Marco, nearly atop Nachos’ neck. They all flew close to the ground. They had no choice in the matter.

Above them, a half-cylinder made of translucent pink glittery magical nonsense enclosed their path, like the arch of a phantasmal bridge, giving them only a half-dozen or so meters to maneuver
between itself and the ground. Beyond that shielding bubble lay an endless dark expanse, sparsely populated by floating broken blue crystals, visible only because they reflected back the pink shimmering light of the magical barrier.

Some of the crystals seemed to have been sculpted into a familiar shape, then fractured yet again.

“Is that…?” Jackie asked, eying the cracked floating statues.

“Yeah,” Marco confirmed. “Queen Moon.”

Thousands of blue crystal statues of Star’s mom floated around outside of the magical bubble, presumably in the void of space. Most where missing parts: an arm, the head, the lower half, or the upper one, with the missing fragments, plus some smaller and more ambiguous bits, floating in between. All of the statues were at least cracked, none whole.

Marco saw a delicate royal arm float by the glittering pink wall of force to his left, hit it, and softly bounce off of it.

“Creepy…” muttered Hekapoo.

The human only let out a sigh of relief in response. It wasn’t that he disagreed, but Marco was pretty sure the air they were breathing ended at the gossamer tunnel around them. So, he was more than a little glad to have it confirmed as reasonably solid after all.

Some of the statues were of Moon in full royal dress, poised and regal. Others were of her in armor. Some had her hold a wand. Some were of her in her butterfly form: winged and six armed. There was even one of her as a kid of around Star’s own age; or the age Star had been when she was on Earth, at least.

What they didn’t see anywhere up there, at all, was a single complete crystal, nor any one piece large enough to contain Star’s frozen body. There also wasn’t any sign of a living, breathing or non-breathing, mewman.

Instead, there was only the long tunnel made of shimmering pink magic. Within it there was air and, now that Marco thought about it, gravity too, while outside the long and narrow shield, transparent broken sculptures of Moon the Undaunted drifted away in dead space.

The tunnel itself started somewhere behind where Hekapoo had opened the portal and ended a few miles in front of them, narrowing even further until it covered only the door of the building behind it. A building that looked surprisingly like Echo Creek’s all-day-breakfast diner.

“Since no one else is saying it, I will,” Kar offered. “This is an obvious trap.”

“More like an obvious mind game,” Jackie replied. “That is what I am thinking it is? Right, Marco? I am not just seeing things?”

He nodded. If she was seeing things, then so was Marco.

It was a perfect replica of the exact same diner they had all met in to talk after his first date with Star. The place where all three of them had become an item.

‘It might be the most weird-awesome thing I have ever heard,’ was what his bestie had to say about the arrangement back then.

As he thought back to those days, Marco felt as if the air had gone from his lungs. It hadn’t, of
course. The shielding bubble was still up there, protecting them from the vacuum. At least, from the one without.

The three of them dismounted the dragoncycles, and carefully opened the door of the diner. It let itself be pulled open easily. It was further evidence that they weren’t working against a vacuum seal. There was air inside too, and an almost perfect replica of the original’s interior. Almost, because there was a tiny wooden trapdoor in the floor, with a pink heart painted over it.

It had been placed exactly where their table had once been, and instead of it, or the red stools on which they had been sitting that far-seeming day.

Jackie opened the trapdoor. There were stairs underneath it.

Stairs made of gleaming silver.

Despite the similar material, they were much smaller, much narrower, than the ones they had climbed up in hell. There were stone walls to the sides and a stone ceiling low over them, forming a tight constraining shaft all around the narrow staircase. Hekapoo and Jackie would be able to fit in, even Marco if he hunched over, but there was no way Nachos or Pearl could follow, not even with their wings fully wrapped around their sides.

Kar didn’t have to say it this time.

Obvious.

Trap.

And yet, what choice did they have? Heading back? Waiting for Janna’s spell to fail? To get ambushed back in the cave instead? Or somewhere else along the boundless deserts of this dying world?

“It’s too dark down there,” Hekapoo complained. “M… maybe we should wait here for a bit?”

“Kiddo,” Kar noted. “You got your own light.”

“Pfft.” The pintsize goddess crossed her arms in front of her chest, annoyed at the reminder.

It probably wasn’t really that she had forgotten. After all, the flame over her head had been their only source of illumination back in the cave. It was more that, well, she was grasping at any excuse not to do this.

Marco could sympathize.

After a few minutes of climbing down the silver stairs inside the narrow tunnel - which Marco was sure were meant to be symbolic of something, even if he didn’t quite know of what - they exited out through what looked like a regular Earth school locker.

It was plastered with pictures of StarFan13, of all people.

Wait! StarFan13 pictures?

It was Star’s locker!

The one from back in Echo Creek Academy.

Except that the place outside the locker wasn’t their school. Or rather, it wasn’t quite their school.
First of all, Echo Creek Academy’s lockers were along an open courtyard. Here, they were walking through a closed hallway, with nothing but a plain brick wall on the right side, and long glass windows on the left. It could almost have been a different hallway of their school, judging from the decor, as if the lockers had simply been moved inside for some reason. But then, there was the view through those windows…

It definitely wasn’t the Echo Creek Academy playground. It wasn’t even Earth. Instead, Marco could see through the glass panels out to the gloomy jail-like central courtyard of Saint Olga’s Reform School for Wayward Princesses. It was empty, except for a burned out circle in the middle. Spread around in pieces, all along the inside of the circle, was a broken suit of armor. It was made of black steel, and covered in nasty-looking spikes.

Princess White’s armor.

“Marco, look,” Jackie shouted from a few steps up ahead, before he could call her to look at the broken chunks of darkened steel.

Instead, she pointed him to a poster on the wall, inside the Echo Creek Academy looking side of the hallway, plastered over familiar red bricks. It looked like one of the Saint Olga’s posters.

Not a Princess Turdina poster. The other kind.

It looked like one of Snow White’s ominous black placards. Except, instead of something like ‘SOME FREEDOMS MUST BE POSTPONED FOR THE CAUSE’ or ‘DOWN WITH TYRANNY, PRINCESSES RULE’, what was written on it was even more ominous. It too, was familiar.

“Behold the dark queen ascending, her will the thread of fate unraveling,” Jackie read aloud.

It was Cass’ prophecy. The full thing, written down in front of them on solid blood-red letters over a huge black paper sheet. Over it was a red clenched fist, like on White’s posters, but this one didn’t hold a crown. It held the magic wand. Star’s magic wand.

“Behold the force of evil incarnate, borne of deepest heart's desire,” Marco continued. “Only surrender may undo the shadow… but the price shall be too high to pay…”

The final bit, the part about death claiming Star was there too. Except it was scrawled all over with thick pink paint.

‘SURRENDER, PLEASE! LET ME FIX IT!’

It was Star’s handwriting.

“What do you think is going on?” Marco asked Jackie.

“I don’t know. This doesn’t make any sense.” She frowned at the poster, and resumed walking past it.

The Echo Creek Academy hallway seemed to extend forever. It was yet another sign that it wasn’t the real thing. After a while, the windows on the left side, which kept showing the Saint Olga courtyard, ended abruptly. A few steps further, there was a new identical set of windows, now on the other side of the passway.

These ones showed, well… hell.
Not just any hell either. The windows looked down - a long way down - onto the flaming city of Dis below.

Marco could hear the cries from those being tortured in Sam’s hell. He felt the heat of the fire, even through the glass and from all the way up. The black hole in the sky, with its corresponding swirling blue aurora of souls, however, was conspicuously absent. Maybe Star couldn’t, or didn’t dare, simulate Sam’s ‘body’?

“Midnight probably built this whole thing,” Jackie reasoned. “Whether it’s mostly solid or mostly an illusion, she controls what we see…”

She rested her hand gently over a nearby window pane. “What we hear and feel too, obviously. But then… why this? If this is just supposed to be a trip down memory lane, why the silver stairs and Sam’s hell? Why St. Olga’s and the prophecy?”

“Maybe she is trying to scare you?” Kar noted.

Jackie shook her head. “She knows us better than that.”

It also didn’t quite fit, either, Marco thought. If Star was trying to make them afraid, then why the diner and Echo Creek Academy? It just didn’t add up.

Was there a pattern they were missing?

Eventually, they reached another door, at the end of that bizarre miles-long school hallway.

This one looked a lot like the one from her room - Star’s, that is - back in Marco’s home. Jackie was the one to push it open.

Behind the door was a long field of grass, and over the field were a series of marble statues upon solemn raised daises. It took Marco a moment to recognize the figures depicted, and even longer to remember where he’d seen them before.

They were statues of the former Queens of Mewni, and the place was the cemetery where Star had delivered her speech for her mother’s funeral.

‘She was our light in every cloudy day, and she would not sleep until the least of her subjects was safe from harm…’ she had said about Moon, right before she followed that by swearing an oath of vengeance, in the name of the Queen of Darkness.

Speaking of Eclipsa, it was right below her statue that they spotted the next out-of-place door. None of the other ‘tombs’ had a door, let alone a purple wooden one that had Marco’s house welcome mat right in front of it. It was also all the way on the opposite side of the graveyard from the one they had used to enter.

Jackie was already walking towards it. Marco followed.

It was a harder going than he had expected. Somehow, all through the cemetery, a sharp cold wind blew, becoming stronger and stronger the more they advanced.

A breeze became a gale, and the gale a tempest, and the tempest howled around them, forcing Marco to hug himself with both arms and put his all behind every step. Jackie, ahead of him, was holding the crystal blade vertically against the wind, as if she expected to cut down the storm. Perhaps, the magical blade could do that.
There were voices in the wind, whispers they couldn’t hear. The former queens? Star? Something else? He couldn’t tell.

“Wait!” came a cry from behind them. “Dum-dums! I said wait!”

Marco turned around, as did Jackie, to find a distressed Hekapoo, cupping the space over her head with both hands. The diminutive Forger of Scissors looked terrified, and she looked guilty, and she looked apologetic.

“I… I can’t…” she trailed off. “For real this time. I can’t move forward here. I think I am not meant to.” She was shivering. “Meanie made it so I can’t.”

The wind picked up even further then, causing Hekapoo to take a step back. The storm responded by softening, slightly.

Marco understood.

“She is right, Jackie,” he explained. “The storm will blow Hekapoo’s flame. I think she will… vanish without it?”

Hekapoo nodded in panic-stricken confirmation, still covering the flickering fire with her tiny hands. Whether that was all because she was an ‘aspect’ - a clone - or even the real Hekapoo would have died without her flame, Marco didn’t know. It wasn’t the time or place to ask.

Jackie sighed. “Alright, go back to the hallway, then. Check if you can make a portal to follow us. If not, wait there for an hour and then… well…”

“Then run back to the cave and hide, kid,” Kar finished. “Because it means we won’t need a portal back.”

The former Magic High Commissioner nodded weakly, and retreated back through the previous door, the one leading to the bizarro-version of Echo Creek Academy.

To the humans, the wind was a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. In fact, without Hekapoo there, it quickly calmed down to the level of a strong breeze. It allowed them to get to the other end, to the door under Eclipsa’s marble skirts. It had only been made to stop the Forger of Scissors.

“You really think she will be able to follow us via portal?” Marco asked, knowing the answer.

“No,” agreed Jackie.

It was just that it was probably worth a try.

The room behind the next door, the one Hekapoo would not be able to join them in, was a huge open chamber. So large, in fact, that Marco couldn’t see any other walls but the one holding the door they entered through.

That single wall curved inwards, ever so slightly, which hinted at the room perhaps being circular. But, if it was, then it’s diameter could well be that of a small town. Marco could hardly imagine a building of that size, let alone a single room. Above them, from a ceiling too far to see, came a faint suffusing violet glow.

They weren’t at ground level, either. Not by a long shot.

Instead, it seemed that the graveyard door had taken them to some sort of reversed balcony, high
upon the walls of the gargantuan room, facing inwards. It looked exactly like that one huge balcony from Butterfly Castle, the one in which they had all sat down to expectate Star’s princess song.

Although neither of them could see the ground below, it was obvious that there was a single way down from their current platform. Well, other than jumping to their death, that is.

“Is that what I think it is?” Marco asked, looking over the edge at the wide red silken ribbon.

It started out where the stone balcony ended and then curved lazily downwards towards the endless abyss, like some sort of hanging bridge made of soft gauzy fabric. All around them, too far for the two humans to reach, flowing down from the unseen distant walls of the beyond-enormous room, were others like it: huge ribbons in every color imaginable.

Under most other circumstances, Marco was sure, Jackie and him would have blushed. Those were the same kind of ribbons as those in the ‘sky’ of that strange dimension with the pillows. The one Star had sent the two of them in their ‘gift date’ without her.

It all seemed like lifetimes ago.

“Let’s be careful, Marco,” Jackie said, looking down the balcony, a step to the left of the ribbon bridge. “We can’t float this time, and something tells me it’s not going to be full of pillows down there.”

Marco walked to her side and nodded, glancing at the void below, then at the red strip of fabric laid over the precipice. Its slope became milder later on as it curved, partially slack over the abyss, but the initial drop was a steep one.

“Jackie, there is another problem.” Marco put a hand over her shoulder. “I think we might be able to control how fast we slide down on this thing. But, well… I am pretty sure we are not going to be able to come up the same way.”

She looked back at him, a weak smile showing through her harsh determination. “Yeah. I guess I knew that already.”

She wasn’t talking about just now. Although, to be honest, she probably hadn’t needed Marco to tell her that, either.

From the moment they crossed the portal, they both suspected they wouldn’t be coming back.

“Marco, if you want to stay behind…” she started.

Marco shook his head.

He walked ahead of Jackie and, cautiously, stepped into the slippery red silk bridge.

The ribbon held their weight effortlessly and, just as Marco had predicted, as long as they were careful about where to put their feet and when to grab a fistful of the fabric or two, they managed to make a controlled descent.

The lower they went, the closer the other ribbons got. Eventually, a sea-green ribbon began flowing parallel to their own. Marco was pretty sure that was symbolic too. Red for him, and green for Jackie? But, even so… so what? What did that mean?

There was something else in the air too, slithering shadows over the ribbons, framed on the violet
light flowing down from the ceiling, flying too fast and too far for Marco to catch a glimpse of them. Jackie pulled out her crystal blade long before they were sure. She probably suspected the same thing he did.

Far away, all the ribbons seemed to converge into a single huge knot. No, not a knot. Some sort of disc: a platform held up by thousands upon thousands of silken threads. Some ribbons, like the one they were on, were slack, while many others were at full tension, supporting the platform’s weight.

The structure itself seemed familiar. Still, there was no way for Marco to make it out from where they were. Not yet. Perhaps the stage in which Ruberiot had performed Star’s princess song? No, that wasn’t it. Maybe some sort of sports arena? A fighting ring?

His thoughts were interrupted by Jackie pulling his shoulder, motioning for him to watch his ten-o’clock. He looked in that direction, then up, and he saw it.

Marco sighed, unsurprised, if not entirely unafraid.

The flaming iron and bone warnicorn kept its distance, circling the two humans from far away, dancing between the jungle of hanging ribbons.

After the first one, they soon saw another, and another after that. The sky soon was lousy with Midnight’s Shadows. On the bright side, it meant they were probably getting close to the end. On a darker thought, that end was probably their own.

They kept sliding slowly down the silken bridge. Jackie had her sword out in her hand the entire time, and Kar and Marco were both alert and ready. None of the living spells in the sky even tried to stop them. Instead, they all seemed content to watch them descend. Their chorus of horse-like neighs didn’t really sound like laughter, except in Marco’s head.

It soon became clear what the platform was, and that made Marco even more confused.

It was from Earth. Echo Creek’s Amphitheater, to be exact. A perfect replica.

As far as he knew, there was only one time Star had been to it…

Marco noticed the burned husk of the billboard propped up atop the stadium’s far side. Yeah, that was it, the Love Sentence concert.

The red ribbon bridge connected with the suspended platform, ending right after it attached to the concrete structure. It landed on the upper side of the gallery, just above the outermost row of seats.

The gallery itself was empty, quiet, abandoned. As Marco and Jackie crossed from the silken hanging path into more solid ground, however, they noticed that there was someone atop the raised stage, far down from where they were.

There, under a faded and half ripped apart Love Sentence poster, was a small circular table, surrounded by three red cushioned diner stools. The same table and stools that had been missing, three rooms ago, in the replica diner, right where they’d found the trapdoor instead.

The setup was fiercely out of place for a concert stage, but it was the exact same arrangement as that in which the three of them had first discussed their relationship, and so, it wasn’t out of place for this strange dreamland, made of mocking memories and slippery symbols.

On the farthest of the three stools sat a naked blonde girl in her late twenties. She had bright blue eyes and pink hearts in her cheeks. She lifted her head up to see the two arriving humans, then
raised her hands in a conciliatory gesture. All six of them.

As Marco and Jackie slowly walked down the stadium’s stairs towards Star, more and more of the skeletal winged unicorns began perching along the edge of the seating gallery. It was an eerie audience, made even more so by all the empty seats in between them and the stage.

“Hi, Marco. Hi, Jackie,” spoke the mewman princess calmly. “I am so glad you are finally here.”

She smiled, faintly.

“S… Star…?” It was all Marco could say.

It was the first time he’d seen her since arriving in Hekapoo’s domain, since the dream. She was older now, but not Janna-old. Maybe Jackie’s age? Maybe a few years younger?

He forced himself to remember she had to have been alive and aware for the larger part of a century. It was just her body that hadn’t aged, held in stasis inside a magical crystal. Star had experienced more time in Hekapoo’s domain than Jackie and him combined.

She was in her Butterfly Form, six arms and all, but she didn’t look anything like what Janna had prepared them to expect. She seemed subdued somehow, wistful. Her eyes were very human, her wings pressed against her back, her form naked and vulnerable.

Was that just what she wanted them to think? An illusion, like the rest of this place?

Marco didn’t know what to do. He had come half expecting a fight with Midnight, glowing green flames and grandiose declarations of godhood. Instead, the person before them was his bestie. It was Star.

And yet, he knew, it was not. Not really.

“Hi, Star,” Jackie smiled at her. “How have you been?” she added, casually.

The mewman’s smile brightened, her eyes filled with innocent joy. It was a familiar sight, especially for him.

She straightened up in her seat and then lifted herself out of it, almost throwing the stool backwards into the floor with the force of her eager jump. She walked, nearly ran, around the table towards Jackie, on the opposite side from Marco.

This time, despite the tense circumstances, the boy was sure he did blush, at least a little bit, at the sight of Star’s naked and fully grown up body.

She was taller now, her limbs long and nimble. Her face had become more oval-shaped, leaving behind some of the childish roundness of her early teens. Her breasts had also filled up somewhat over the years and, while not large per se, fit the princess’ lithe body just about perfectly. Her wings extended slowly behind her, pitch black but framed by a bright golden trim.

She was beautiful. She really was.

“Hey, Jackie,” Star walked towards her, beaming, with all six arms open. “Hugs?”

“Sure thing, Star,” Jackie grinned back, and took a few steps forward.

Marco knew what was coming. He reminded himself that it was for the best. That this person before them really was Midnight, not Star. That she was a monster.
Even so, he had to hold himself from warning his best friend.

The girls were only a step or two away from each other when Jackie’s smile faded into a determined frown, when her sword rose up and her feet became firmly planted on the stone below. It all happened in a single fluid fast motion.

Before Marco took in his next breath, Jackie lunged forward with her blade, aiming at Star’s heart.

The invincible glass point stopped barely an inch away from the princess’ naked chest.

As Marco began the fierceness ritual, so too did his hands, his arms, and everything below his neck become stuck, frozen in place.

There was a green glow around Jackie’s body now and - Marco realized a moment after - also around his own. It didn’t touch either of their faces, or the glass sword, but it illuminated everything else near them. He couldn’t move an inch, and he was sure the same was happening to Jackie.

He could see it in her scowl, even as everything but her face was as still as a statue. He knew she was struggling to push just a little further forward, to finish her stab towards Star. Frustration burned quietly behind her bright green eyes.

Kar, entirely caught in the green glow, was suddenly silent, even inside Marco’s head.

“You know,” Star mussed. “I am sad that you tried to kill me, obviously. But, besides that, I am also a little disappointed that you thought that was going to work.”

“What can I say? It was at least worth a shot,” Jackie remarked, the fake friendly tone from before replaced by restrained cold fury.

“Was it really?” Star stepped away from the path of the stopped blade, slowly walking around so that her entire body was directly to the left of Jackie’s outstretched sword arm. “Honestly, Jackie, you must think I am very stupid, then. It’s not like I didn’t see you try that exact same trick with winged-boy just this morning…”

*Orel,* Marco thought.

That’s right, they had been outside any natural scrying blindspot when they fought him, and too far away from Janna’s hiding spell for that to help them any. So, of course, Star could see them back then. She obviously had been watching.

“Sorry about Janna, by the way,” she added. “No, really. I am. I know she wanted me dead and all, but… Well, all I am saying is I wish it had been different.”

She looked from Jackie to Marco, and back to Jackie.

“You two can talk, you know?” she muttered, clearly frustrated. “I really, really, think we should talk.”

“Star…” Marco was the first to respond to that.

He just didn’t know what to say.

“…you are not well,” he tried.

“No, I guess I am not,” Star admitted. “Decades of loneliness will do that to you, Marco. But, in
my defense, I am not the one who just tried to kill her friend.”

Jackie chuckled at that, without any joy. “Friends? Are you kidding me? After the last thirteen years… after Gwen… after…” She couldn’t continue.

Star closed her eyes, briefly, seeming to think.

“Look, that one is a long story,” she said, getting a tired groan in response. “I know. I know, Jackie. You hate it when I say that, but…”

This wasn’t the first time they had argued, Marco realized. Hell, Star had shown herself to him in one way or another four times before now, in just the short while he’d been inside Hekapoo’s domain. It stood to reason that, over thirteen years, she and Jackie had also spoken with one another at least as many times.

“But it’s true. If we want to make progress here, then we are really going to have to start somewhere else, somewhere simpler” the six-armed mewman continued. “There has to be some… some common ground, some understanding.

“Look, I won’t repeat how much I missed you two, how much I love you still, what I’d give… what I have given up for you to be safe.”

Her voice was full of sadness, and fear. Her pleading sincere.

“But, well, have you two at least stopped to consider…” Star paused for a second, her eyes meeting Jackie’s own. Then, careful not to touch the edge, she placed a single index finger, from her lower left hand, right on the flat of Sam’s glass blade. “…that you are fighting on the wrong side here?”

“What do you mean?” asked Jackie, just before Marco could do the same.

There was a black glow, a sort of anti-light that shone then on the tip of Star’s finger. It didn’t seem impressive, not compared to some of her other spells but, somehow, Marco knew there was deadly power behind it. A dark blurry spot formed on the surface of the crystal blade. It grew to be barely an inch or two wide, and then slowly began shrinking back to nothing. Although black instead of white, it otherwise looked a bit like a hot breath briefly fogging the surface of a mirror.

The mewman frowned, annoyed, and reluctantly removed her finger from the side of the sword.

“The devil gave you a weapon to kill me, Jackie.” Star shook her head sadly. “And you just decided to go along with that? Figured it was the right thing to do?”

She turned around, facing Marco.

“And you? You want me dead because some seer girl said I had to be killed?” Star asked. “What happened to the end of the world not being enough to break us up as friends? What happened to trusting in me, Marco?”

The words were like a knife to his gut. For a moment, Marco was ready to apologize, to admit fault. Then he remembered Silence.

“Sorry, Star,” he said. “I didn’t understand what I was saying back then. The end of the world… Damnit, Star! I didn’t think you’d be the one to cause it!”

“But, Marco, I am not,” she protested. She glanced back at Jackie. “Sam is. He is the one who threatened to destroy Earth, and Mewni. I want to stop him. He is the one who threatened to kill
your families, your friends, my dad…”

“You’ve killed thousands, Star!” Jackie protested immediately. “You killed the Air Raiders! You took over innocent girls, and mass murdered entire towns! You systematically went after the people I loved!”

Star sighed. As she did, her wings extended out and flowed slowly back down to her sides. She floated briefly off the ground.

“That’s different, Jackie.” Rather than guilty or horrified, she sounded frustrated. “The people here… They aren’t real. They are made out of Hekapoo, like my spells are made out of me. I don’t complain when you kill my warnicorns. Do I?

“This place was made to serve a purpose, to be someone’s tool. I just… repurposed it.” She indicated the space around them, the huge chamber full of floating ribbons and containing Echo Creek Amphitheater within. “I made it my tool. That’s all.”

She hesitated. “But, then again, we are getting back to the part that’s hard to explain. Can you two just trust me on it? For now?”

“What did you repurpose it for?” asked Jackie, ignoring the last part. “Why the prayers? Why Midnight? What exactly are you trying to do?”

“Sigh. I suppose I can explain that much,” Star conceded. “I am trying to break out of Hekapoo’s prison. They are part of her, fragments of Hekapoo, their aggregate worship can… It’s hard to explain. It will help me undo what she did.”

Hekapoo’s prison? Was she trying to get herself out of Hekapoo’s domain or…?

‘A ritual of sealing. For a force greater than myself.’

“And these ‘fragments of Hekapoo’,” pressed Jackie. “How are they different from you and me? Do they think of themselves as spells?”

“No, Jackie, of course they don’t, but, well…” Star seemed to have some trouble explaining the distinction. “They don’t have souls. Okay? It’s a crude way to put it, but they don’t have the same sort of flame within them than you or I do, they just have a piece of Hekapoo’s flame.”

“Does that make them think less?” Jackie continued, anger rising in her voice. “Love less? Feel less fear?”

Star didn’t answer, she just sighed again, apparently tired of explaining something that to her was obvious, to those who didn’t want to listen. But, from Jackie’s perspective, there was nothing to explain. Magic stuff didn’t make you a person; acting like a person did, feeling the things a person feels did. Really, Marco thought, it was his perspective too. It had to be.

“So,” he interrupted. A grim certainty forming inside his mind. “When you say you are trying to break out of Hekapoo’s prison… are you talking as Star? Or as Wish?”

The butterfly-winged girl turned around to face Marco and smiled. At first, she didn’t answer.

Then, after a moment, “I can’t lie.”

It had been Star’s voice, the same one she had been talking with since she froze them. It was the vaguely sad, vaguely desperate voice of their friend pleading for understanding. Those words, said
by that voice, sent a chill down Marco’s spine.

He looked to Jackie, shock probably visible in his face.

By contrast, the former knight captain’s expression hadn’t changed at all. She knew from the beginning who they were dealing with.

“So, out of curiosity,” Jackie asked, “did you really think we’d fall for that act?”

“It isn’t an act,” said ‘Star’ as her wings extended open behind her to their full span, as her feet floated just slightly off the ground, without coming back down. “Nothing we said was a lie, and we do miss and love you both, and, well, like you said before…”

Her eyes glowed bright violet, translucent green flames began burning harmlessly over her pale skin. She was mewman and she wasn’t. She was Star and, at the same time, she was also the thing that had killed her mother.

“...it was at least worth a shot,” added Midnight.

Chapter End Notes

**Coming up next:** Chapter 44: Midnight

... how is *that* for a title?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!