Fifty Grades of Shay

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Fifty Grades of Shay

by ShayMcSudonim

Summary

Shameless' Self-Insert Fanfic. In which several undead Possession Sues—all of whom are author avatars—spend the entire story monologuing and absolutely ruin the plot of Steven Universe, Star Trek: TOS, and Undertale.

Notes

As some of you may have picked up on, I enjoy writing in many different genres of fanfiction, including but not limited to: Elves in Stories Where Elves Do Not Belong, Filk, Crack, Pepperjack, AU, and Crossover. One genre that I have not yet attempted, however, is a fic that includes a blatant author avatar.

Thus, I've decided that I'm going to write a self-insert fanfic. This will not be high art, and will be written with the sole purpose of making me happy. If that sounds cool to you, then welcome to the show!

My outline currently consists four parts:

Part 1: Lighthearted
Part 2: A Heart Full of LOVE
Part 3: Bleeding Heart
Part 4: You Ain't Gonna Break My Heart in Two
Chapter 1

Part 1: Lighthearted

The first thing that Ash noticed was the water.

Probably because her lungs were halfway filled with it.

Spluttering and coughing, Ash Hughes kicked her way frantically to the surface of what seemed to be a river, and then tread water unsteadily as she proceeded to hack up a lung and a half.

She had no idea what was going on. Hadn't she just been driving home from Kendra's house? Was—was all this a dream? There was no way to know for sure—not unless she slept, woke again, and then made sure that she still remembered all of this.

No. No, wait, there had been something else. She'd been terrified of something—coming head-on, veering into her lane, and then—what? She couldn't remember. She must have fallen into a river somehow, but she hadn't been anywhere near one, so how in the heck...?

After dog paddling her way over to the shore, and dragging herself onto a rush-covered riverbank, Ash allowed herself to collapse backwards and stare at the sky in disbelief.

This couldn't be happening.

Ash wasn't left to stew in her own thoughts for long, however, as a commanding voice soon rang out from the distance.

"You there!"

Still panting from exertion, Ash managed to raise her head and answer. "Yeah?"

She stopped. Whoever this was, he wore white robes and had very pointy hair. Weird. She mentally added a tic mark to the possibility that this was all a dream.

He noticed her interest.

"What are you looking at?" he asked.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Even if this was just a hallucination, there was no point in being rude. "Nothing," she said. "just you're very, uh—" Ash stopped herself before she could say 'strange,' "—handsome," she substituted. He was, now that she thought about it, but that definitely hadn't been the first thing that she'd noticed.

He nodded, accepting the compliment with a self-satisfied smirk. "There are advantages to having a royal Ka."

Ash had mostly gotten her breath back, and managed to sit up. "You're a king?" she asked. That kind of made sense, in a dream-logic sort of way—that she would run into the most important person first. Might as well see what she could find out from him.
"Yes," he answered, grandly, "Pharaoh Atemakhem."

"Ah... sorry," said Ash, not sure whether an apology was strictly necessary, but deciding to play it safe, nonetheless. "Ramses the Second is the only Pharaoh that I've ever heard of."

He sighed in disappointment. "Even if you had studied my people extensively," he said, "you still probably wouldn't have heard of me. You see, after I died, my people tried to pretend that I'd never existed."

"Oh," said Ash. "Why would they do that?"

"Because," he answered, beginning to regain some of his former enthusiasm, "I was the Pharaoh who let power go to his head and decided that I was the only god that Egypt could legally worship. And that people should worship me through violent—and often deadly—versions of children's card games."

...okay, so even if this guy really was a king, he was probably also a lunatic. Best tread lightly here.

"You sound proud of yourself," said Ash, warily.

He polished his fingernails on his robe and then examined them. "That's because I am."

So, the jury was still out, but by this point Ash was putting her money solidly on 'dream.' It was possible that this was somehow all real, but, if that was the case, then there was no way she'd be the only one to notice the guy and his ridiculous getup, even if her surroundings did seem to be remarkably void of other people...

For now, she would play along, she supposed. That was what she usually did, in dreams.

"To each his own," said Ash. She took a look around. Nothing was familiar. She stood by a river, but there was also desert visible in the distance. "I don't suppose that you know where I am or how I got here, Pharaoh Atemata—" nope, she did not remember what his name was. "Pharaoh?" she shortened, falling back on titles.

"I also use Atem," he offered, taking pity on her apparent difficulty with Egyptian names.

"Pharaoh Atem?" asked Ash.

He nodded. "Well, to answer your question," he continued, with a beatific smile, "you are dead."

That... was a possibility which hadn't occurred to her. It wasn't at all implausible, considering—well, a lot of things—but it could still be a dream. She'd hold onto that for as long as she possibly could.

"So, what does this mean for me?" asked Ash.

"I shall take you to have your heart weighed," answered the Pharaoh, "and after that, hopefully, the afterlife."

"Heart weighed... wait, I think I may have ended up in the wrong place," said Ash, suddenly concerned. "I'm an agnostic."

He shrugged. "The afterlife is always the same. We were simply the only ones to get it right."

"We, Mr. 'Worship Me Through Card Games'?" said Ash.

He coughed. "My people in general, not the royal 'we.'"
"Is that why you're the one ferrying new souls around?" asked Ash. "This is some sort of community service, maybe?"

The Pharaoh flashed her a friendly smile that immediately made Ash suspicious. "...would you, perhaps, like to swim there yourself?" he asked.

"Nevermind, most benevolent and seaworthy of Pharaohs," Ash said, scrambling her way onto the boat before her guide could change his mind. "Excelsior!"

He stepped into the boat and retrieved the oar, using it to set the ship on its course, and to guide it as the current picked up in the middle of the river.

"Crocodile!" hissed Ash, as she spotted the reptile, her face fixed into a rictus of terror.

"I see it," the Pharaoh assured her.

"Hippo, Hippo, Hippo…!"

"Yes, it is. Good for you. You appear to know your animal names."

"Ngh," she said, teeth clenched, holding the sides of the boat in a death-grip. "What sort of rainbow bridge nonsense—why are there animals, if this is supposed to be the afterlife?!!"

"Why shouldn't there be?" asked Atem, not bothered in the least.

In spite of Ash's unnecessary flailing about, however, they eventually reached their destination. Ash was waved into a passageway as the Pharaoh turned the boat around, presumably to head back and pick up more lost souls.

Facing the cavernous halls of Maybe-The-Afterlife, Ash took a breath, squared her shoulders… then gave up on trying to be brave, and crept quietly down the hallway, making every effort to step softly against the stone floor. The only sounds that she could make out were distant and muted, and Ash found herself reluctant to disturb the silence.

She, eventually, emerged into a chamber containing a number of giant animal-headed figures, that definitely pinged her instincts as 'Egyptian,' but none of whom she could have named to save her life.

One of them was a mummy, it looked like. He sat upon a throne, watching the proceedings.

Standing by the scales, there was also a guy with a bird head, and next to him what looked like a bird woman, maybe? She seemed to like feathers, at least, but her head was human. On her other side was a guy with a dog's head.

And also, on the floor next to them, was a monstrosity. It was at least part crocodile and part lion, but there were other animals mixed in there as well. The sight of that last one gave Ash a sinking feeling, for some reason which she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Another soul already stood before the scales, who paused, briefly, to meet her gaze as she entered the chamber. After a moment, he returned his attention to the judges, without so much as a break in his running commentary on events.

His voice reverberated in an obnoxious, self-assured tone that sounded male, even if the entity himself resembled nothing so much as a triangle in a top hat. He looked like he could have been a video game antagonist, so ridiculous was his character design. But, apparently, fashion aesthetic wasn’t a requirement for the afterlife. For, when the bird-guy placed his 'heart' on the set of scales (it
just looked like a smaller triangle to Ash, but, hey, who was she to judge?), the weighing pan containing the heart leveled perfectly with the other pan, which held a feather.

"His heart balances," announced feather lady.

"You may go," decreed the mummy-king, from his throne.

"All right!" crowed the triangle. "Take that, every psychologist that I ever spoke to!" He laughed maniacally, as a door opened up through which light streamed. The being floated lazily through with both arms outstretched, his hands forming victory signs.

The doorway closed after him with an ominous thud.

"Next!" said the guy with the bird head, as he spotted her lurking in the doorway.

"Clara Hart," he read from a scroll, as she approached.

Ash nodded in acknowledgment that that was her legal name, and he went on.

"Died at age twenty," he read, "Cause of death: blunt trauma and blood loss. Has her heart been retrieved?" this last was said to the guy with a dog head.

A jar was quickly handed over, and the bird man sighed.

"Barbarian cultures," he muttered, "always burying corpses with the organs still in them, making things difficult for everyone..."

The woman nudged his arm. "At least this one wasn't cremated."

All three of them shuddered.

"Well then," said the bird man, and Ash decided that he was probably their stenographer and/or secretary, "Let's see what we have."

Ash was pretty sure that she remembered, now, how things would work. She'd read a picture book on Ancient Egypt once, when she was a kid. It seemed like your heart was weighed, and if it was found heavier than the 'feather of truth' then you'd get fed to the crocodiles? Or, in this case, the crocodile-lion-thing, it looked like. Triangle Man had been just able to balance and sneak through by the skin of his teeth, but ideally, one's heart should be lighter than the feather of truth.

Unfortunately, Ash had no idea what exact kind of 'truth' they would be measuring. Did they use a karmic scale? Physical and/or spiritual purity? Fealty to the Egyptian Gods during life? If that last one was it, then she was most certainly screwed.

The record-keeper placed her heart on the weighing dish, and the woman leaned forward with a critical eye to read the results.

The scales stopped with Ash's heart resting a good inch or two above the level of the feather.

She was just about to smile in relief, when she noticed the woman frowning at the scales.

"Another one for Ammit, it looks like," she said, with clinical detachment, and the great beast stretched its jaws in a yawn.

"Wait," said Ash, panicking. "I thought that my heart being lighter was a good thing!" Her picture books had lied to her? Well, granted, they were for kids, and that kind of thing was often censored,
"Being balanced is a good thing," the feather woman answered. "It isn't balanced to be an evil person... nor is it balanced to be a good one."

Ash shuddered. "I would like to wake up now."

"This is not a dream," said the guy with the bird head.

Ash backed herself into a corner and looked around desperately for something, anything, that might help… and not finding anything useful. The crocodile monster was standing now, and stretching, even as she tried to come up with a plan...

Instead of moving to attack her, however, Ammit just curled up and went back to sleep.

"What?" said Ash, only to see the bird-man facepalming.

"I don't know why we even bother, anymore," he complained. "We need a new executioner."

"Uh," said Ash, who'd been expecting for this to turn full-out nightmare and then, hopefully wake up, "Am I still going to be eaten?"

The woman was shaking her head. "One day he just stopped devouring souls, and none of us could ever figure out why." She sighed. "We've... had to develop ways to get around it." They all looked to the mummy-king for wisdom.

"Your soul has been symbolically devoured," said the King, "you are denied the afterlife until such time as you re-balance your traits and values. Maat will give you your assignment."

The feather woman nodded and got up from her place, flexing her arms, like a typist trying to avoid carpal tunnel. "Come on."

Ash followed, now completely unsure of anything.

"If we can't get rid of you, we may as well use you," Maat was saying, as she guided Ash through a series of corridors. "The spirit of the law calls for balance. If we can bring your soul back into acceptable parameters, then the problem is solved and we can send you on through, no problem."

"Um, Ms. Matt?" asked Ash.

"Maat," the feathered woman corrected.

"Right, sorry. So, does that mean I'll get to go back to Earth?"

"Yes," answered the woman, "but not Earth as you know it."

"What do you mean?" asked Ash.

"We pair you with a polar opposite," Maat explained, "Someone whose heart was heavier than the feather of truth. You will be roommates, and, during sleep, your souls will be tethered back to your chambers, so that you may speak with each other, dimming the light of your own heart, and brightening your partner's darkness, respectively."

Ash blinked. "And when we're not asleep?"
"You'll be sent to relive each other's lives, each in the other's body," said Maat.

Ash's face twisted in disgust, but, before she could say anything else, they were outside a door.

"The universe in which your counterpart lives is one which you might know as a work of fiction," said Maat. "I suppose I should ask, have you ever heard of a woman named Rebecca Sugar?"

"The Adventure Time composer?" said Ash, in surprise. "Well, I can't say it's my favorite show or anything, but I'm at least passingly familiar with the characters."

"Guess again."

"Um... did she work on Hotel Transylvania? I watched that one three or four times, for no reason that I can adequately explain."

"No," said Maat. "Try Steven Universe."

Ash paused. "Sugar worked on that show?"

"She was its creator."

"... why did you have to pick Steven Universe?"

Maat was surprised. "You aren't familiar with the story?"

"I've seen maybe a few episodes?" said Ash, massaging her temples through the growing headache. "It's not like I'll be completely in the dark. But if I had known ahead of time that I'd be going there, I'd have done a whole lot more research, I can tell you that."

"Interesting," said Maat. "We try to pair together compatible personalities. Usually, when this happens, the souls in question are very familiar with the universes that they're visiting. It gives them great advantage in accomplishing their goals."

"Where's the fun in that?" asked Ash, honestly bewildered at the prospect. Sure, she might have liked spoilers, but that didn't mean that they were the end-all be-all of enjoying fiction.

Maat frowned. "This is not meant to be 'fun.'"

"What am I doing there, anyway?" Ash asked. "Is there some special task that I'm needed for?"

"Needed?" asked Maat, in disapproval, "Child, balance depends on no one person or act: it's a process. This world would get along fine without you, and it would also be just fine with you in it. You are being sent there because of what you need from that world, not something that world needs from you."

"Huh."

The goddess looked amused. "Surely, you weren't expecting to be the center of the universe?"

A surprised laugh escaped her. "Well, when you say it like that, no," Ash admitted. "But, after all the escapist fantasy I've read? I always thought that, if I ever did go to another world, I'd at least have some special reason for it."

"In any case, this is where I leave you." said Maat. The door opened, and another woman, this one with what looked like a pillar on her heard, emerged. Ash thought, for a moment, that this was her assigned partner until the woman turned to Maat and spoke.
"The other one has been briefed," the woman said, and Maat nodded. Then, she turned to Ash.

"You have ten minutes to get to know each other, then you will be sent off to begin re-forging your own destinies."

With that, the two of them were gone.

Ash sighed, took a deep breath, and knocked on the door.

There was a long pause, and she was just raising her hand to knock again, a bit more forcefully, when a voice from inside the room called out, "Come in!"

Ash slowly opened the door to reveal what looked a lot like a one room apartment.

Inside was a girl who looked close to Ash's age, but not at all human. She was built a good deal more solidly than Ash was—her fingers nearly half as thick as Ash's wrist—and the other girl had more than a foot of height to her advantage.

Her skin was a mottled mess of camouflage patterns comprising three different colors: silvery-white, black, and a greenish-brown that Ash decided could charitably be called 'hazel.' She had no hair, and her eyes were faceted, like those of an insect. Though larger than a human's eyes, they were lidded, and the individual segments were as camouflaged as the rest of her, each segment being one of the same three colors as her skin. The only reason that Ash didn't hesitate in calling her female was the fact that she wore no shirt and had what were quite clearly breasts. For legwear, she wore parachute pants covered in pockets. She wore no shoes whatsoever.

But the centerpiece of the outfit was something that made Ash break out into a smile. It was a cape. A great, billowing floor-length cape that any Sith Lord would have been proud of. Though it had a camouflage pattern like the rest of her, the cape shimmered as she moved, as though covered in glitter.

A cape. A sparkly cape. Something that was clearly meant to attract attention… had been slapped over with a camouflage pattern and called perfect. The girl reminded Ash somewhat of the beetle-headed Khepri from a China Miéville novel that she'd once read to impress a teacher, and also of a butterfly-themed superhero.

The no-shirt thing bothered Ash a bit, but she decided right then and there that this was probably going to be someone that she could get along with.

When she entered into the room, the other girl's eyes widened in surprise, as though Ash was the last person she'd ever expected to see. "Clara Hart?" the girl asked, sounding utterly bewildered.

Ash was startled. "Do I know you?" she asked. She was sure that she didn't.

"I mean," Ash continued, "I was going to introduce myself as 'Ash,' but how do you even know my legal name?" She was immediately suspicious. Ash was a writer, and a writer wasn't worth her salt if she couldn't spot patterns.

It came to her in a flash of understanding: Matt had said that compatible personalities in this situation were usually already familiar with the world that they would be going to.

"My world is fictional in your universe," said Ash, "isn't it?"

The other girl did a double take, realization lighting her eyes as well. "Are you saying that my world is fictional in yours?"
Ash nodded. "An American animated series called, 'Steven Universe.' At least, according to Matt."

"Maat."

"Yeah, her."

The girl tapped her cheek thoughtfully. It sounded like the clinking of champagne flutes. "That... makes some amount of sense," she admitted, gathering herself as best she was able. "On my world, you are from a webcomic entitled, 'Four Stories Short.'"

Ash frowned. Assuming that this wasn't a dream, that would mean that she truly was dead. And four was the exact number of drafts that she had hidden away in her desk, back home. "That story's not about me, I take it?"

The girl shook her head. "Not directly. A guy named Jordan Mose was the protagonist... he accidentally killed you while trying to kill himself. He spends the rest of the story trying to atone by finishing your stories and getting them published. I died before the series ended, but I was following the updates pretty religiously."

"Atonement?" Ash's eyes narrowed. "I'm a martyr? A character written in so that someone else can feel bad about killing me? That's... I'm not sure if insulting is even a strong enough word..."

"Yeah," agreed the girl. "I could never really sympathize with the protagonist—too much man-pain—but I liked the concept of one writer finishing another's stories. And... man, I still can't get over it—a children's cartoon? I can't think of a single place I'd fit into a children's cartoon, unless I was a villain. But I wouldn't exactly say that I was opposed to the Crystal Gems, per se, so why...?"

"Beats me," said Ash, with a shrug. "I only ever saw the show when I had to babysit. I didn't see more than half a dozen episodes, and those out of order. What's your name?"

The girl smiled, wryly. "Legally? It's Muscovite," she said, and Ash resisted the urge to snicker. The girl's slight Russian accent seemed a lot more relevant now. She was most likely a villain, and a pun-themed one at that. "But," the girl continued, "well... 'Ash Hughes.' If the webcomic was accurate, then that's your pen name, correct?"

"Right," Ash agreed.

"Let's use those," said the girl. "Names that you choose yourself always carry more meaning." She held out a hand. "Nice to meet you, Ash Hughes. I'm Saino Moore—Sai for short."

She was a writer, too? Ash smiled nervously and clasped the girl's hand. It was cool to the touch, but that didn't matter. In the midst of all this strangeness, she'd found a kindred spirit.

That was when the world went dark and Ash woke up in a body that wasn't hers.
Chapter 2

Everything was black, and moving was difficult. If it weren't for the fact that she wasn't drowning, Ash almost would have thought that she'd fallen back into the Egyptian Styx. Or should that be 'Stygian Nile'? Wasn't like anyone had given her a tour of the place so she didn't have much of a knowledge base to reference, but...

It was then that Ash realized that she wasn't breathing.

She felt her arms, and realized that they were bare. She wasn't wearing a shirt. A cape fluttered behind her.

She must have been in Sai's body. Just like Maat had said would happen.

...so, that meant that she just had to wait until she fell asleep again, and then she could ask Sai what the heck was going on.

She started walking through what felt like sand, which kicked up with each step that she took.

Eventually, she followed a red glow that she saw in the distance and wound up at what looked like deep sea vents. There were tube worms, spider crabs and various other denizens of the deep milling about.

Huh. She wasn't just underwater, she was at the bottom of the ocean. She had suspected, but hadn't thought it was truly possible. Shouldn't she be dying of the bends, or at least of asphyxiation?

She wandered around for another few hours but didn't succeed in finding a way out.

Eventually, she lay down on the ground and fell asleep.

When she woke up, she was in the room where she'd met Sai. She was still in Sai's body.

And Sai, it looked like, was now in Ash's.

Ash's eight-year-old body. What on Earth was going on?

"So," said Sai. "it appears that we actually will be re-living each other's lives."

"Yeah," said Ash. "Anything I should know? Such as why you're vacationing at a deep sea vent?"

Sai was surprised. "That's where you are?"

"Yes," Ash agreed. "And you're... eight? Nine? I'm not sure why they wouldn't just send us back to each other's births if they were going to send us back in time."

"The ocean," Sai mused, thoughtfully. "From my perspective, that was at least ten years ago."

"Which makes sense, if you're eight: I was twenty, when I was killed," said Ash. "Maybe they're trying to keep us in lock-step with each other?"
"That's one theory, and I suppose it fits," said Sai. "I'm... a lot older than twenty." She blinked, after a moment's silence, as though coming back to herself. "What does 'Steven Universe' tell you about Gems?"

Ash shrugged. "To be honest, I never watched the show if I could help it, so I don't really know."

"Ah, well, simply enough, our powers come from our gemstones." Sai stepped forward and placed a hand on Ash's cheek. "My own Gem, Muscovite, exhibits nearly perfect basal cleavage... so it's very stable as fragments. Wear and tear and... other factors, mean that my own—now your own—gem is mostly fragmented throughout your body, with a small cluster available for summoning your weapon. She moved her hand to tap a tiny black circle of what felt like glass that Ash hadn't noticed before on her cheek.

"It is from our Gems that we get our strength, our sense of self, and most importantly, our weapons. I make Glitter Grenades," she explained, "Well, I guess you do now," she corrected herself. "They spread diseases and viruses of my own design, aiding in sabotage and covert warfare."

"Very useful," said Ash, trying her best not to flinch. Some people had hard lives, she was no one to judge, "But not very kid-friendly. I doubt that you were in the show." And that was without even mentioning her apparent hatred of shirts...

"Wouldn't surprise me in the least," agreed Sai. "You weren't in Four Stories Short in anything other than flashbacks. Anything that I should know about being human?"

"You need to eat three times a day," said Ash. "Sleep for eight hours. Drink as often as you're thirsty. Sunlight is beneficial, as is exercise, and I could really stand to get more of both.

"We don't have gems or weapons," Ash continued. "And I'm a writer, so my greatest strengths are mental rather than physical... making me less than useless in a fight."

Sai nodded. "I'll make the best of what I have."

"Thanks," said Ash, with a sigh. "This whole situation is stupid, and it's nice to have another sane person along for the ride."

Sai paused. "Are you going to try and balance out your soul?"

Ash scoffed. "No. I'm happy the way I am. You?"

"Same," admitted Sai. "I am spinning around the beginnings of a plan, though."

"Oh?" asked Ash.

Sai leaned in closer. "It might be possible to temporarily combine our two souls into one, at least long enough for us to have our composite heart weighed, and judged as equally balanced."

"Weird," said Ash. "Well, I'll try anything once."

"That's all in the distant future of course," said Sai, waving a hand. "For now, we need only focus on our respective agendas. I still intend to pursue darker things, but I shall offer no unreasonable harm to
"I'll make the same pact," said Ash. She hesitated. "It is just a guideline, though, right? With clauses for self-defense and everything?"

"Of course," said Sai, looking offended that she'd even needed to ask.

"Right, then," said Ash. "I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted."

Sai shrugged. "I could sleep."

The two of them drifted off not long afterward, each feeling slightly more secure against the future than they had the previous morning.

Ash decided to just walk in a straight line and see if it took her anywhere. A few days of walking didn't get her much more than into slightly less dark territory. Sai's body was denser than the water around her, making floating impossible.

Once she thought she caught a flash of gold in the darkness, but—when she turned to get a better look—it was gone.

"I'm sorry that you got partnered with me, by the way," said Sai, the next time that they were both asleep.

"Why?" asked Ash.

"Because I," Sai coughed, "am a giant pile of trash."

Ash frowned. "You're not."

Sai fidgeted, uncomfortably. "According to FSS you mostly write sci-fi and fantasy, correct?"

Ash flashed a bright smile. "Right! I mean, I know lots of people consider those to be lower forms of literature, but I've always thought that was silly. If you don't write what you love, then what's the point of writing at all?"

"Ash," said Sai, heavily.

"Yes?"

"I write fanfiction."

"Oh." All Ash's knowledge of fanfiction came from odd reference jokes in other media. "Do you enjoy it?"

Sai nodded, reluctantly. "Very much."

Ash shrugged. "Well, I don't understand it myself, but if you're having fun, then that's all that should really matter."

Sai blinked. "I realize that I only know you as a caricature, and that I shouldn't make assumptions, but, Ash? You're a beautiful cinnamon roll if there ever was one."

Ash had no idea what that was. "Thank... you?"
Sai hugged her.

A few minutes later, they were comparing media.

"Most people don't realize, but fanfiction is actually a highly creative arena," said Sai, now in full-on fandom mode. "There are genres of storytelling that you just don't find anywhere else. Or at least, not nearly as widespread."

"Like what?" asked Ash.

Sai paused. "Does your universe have the movie 'Groundhog Day'?"

"Bill Murray?" said Ash. "Time loop?"

"Exactly!" said Sai. "Well, for any given piece of original fiction, you can probably find a dozen or two time-loop fics. We call those 'Peggy Sues'. There are also far more crossovers, since you don't have to worry so much about copyright. Alternate universe fics, unofficial sequels, the list goes on and on."

"What do you write?" asked, starting to catch Sai's enthusiasm.

"Uh" said Sai, suddenly brought up short. "Well, have you seen Lord of the Rings?"

"Yeah," said Ash, confused as to why the mood had suddenly shifted.

Sai swallowed nervously. "I wrote a Lord of the Rings story where Legolas' dad and Gimli's third cousin had a kid together." Technically true, thought Sai. No need to mention that it was mpreg...

"Oh. Why?" said Ash, thinking the idea surprisingly specific, and relatively mundane. If you were going to rewrite canon, why not go for broke?

Sai shrugged, somewhat wistfully. "It made me happy."

Ash eventually made it out to the open ocean, and it was there that she stopped. Her favorite video games had always been Portal and Shadow of the Colossus, after all. She liked situations where she could be alone, with only one or two other people to talk to. She got to see Sai every time that she slept, so she wasn't exactly hurting for company.

Her home-base, which she found after several months of searching, was a house that Sai claimed to have built herself out of a crashed spaceship. It was underwater, but it had internet access, so whatever. Ash made sure to check the news every couple of days, and while this place was obviously different from her version of earth, both in history and current events, Ash's day-to-day activities were surprisingly normal. Apart from a few issues with the user interface.

"Sai," said Ash, "why does TV look like crap now?"

"Your concept of 'DNA' is a novel one," said Sai. "It allows for so much specialization. And all of it—all of it—is open-source."

"Meaning?"

'I genetically' modified my vision using some interesting programming that I picked up from your
Mantis Shrimp.

"Not to be a broken record here but...?"

"You can see five times more colors than you used to be able to."

Ash paused. "...does that mean that everything now looks monotonous to you?"

"Yes, but I can deal with it," said Sai, waving a hand dismissively. "You have more color neurons, anyway..."

"Sai, how do I manifest your weapon?"

"Ash, how do you use an ATM?"

"Sai, is there any way to make your weapon non-lethal?"

"Ash, what's the point of middle names?"

"Sai, what does NSFW mean?"

"Ash, why does your species have 'merry go rounds' in the first place, if they're only going to injure children?"

"Sai, what does 'none pizza with left mineral' mean, and why did you frame it and put it on the wall?"

"Ash, why can't I stay out past midnight?"

"Sai, why doesn't your world have any serious diseases? Is it because it's a children's cartoon and premature death isn't allowed?"

"Possibly," said Sai. "Although, the way I remember it was me being in hiding for a millennium and a half with nothing to do but experiment. Your own genome and immune system wasn't a particularly difficult one to root. When I died for the first time, I'd reached a level of boredom where I was designing diseases specifically to target Gems and... made my latest creation a little too well, one might say."

"You were killed by a disease of your own creation," said Ash, not entirely sure how to take that.

"Yes," said Sai, "and, here's the kicker: I designed the virus to be carried by humans, but not to infect them. Unless they had the resources to fabricate a cure, it is inevitable that, after my own demise, the Crystal Gems suffered the same fate."

"So, you killed off all the protagonists."

Sai shrugged. "Steven Universe may have survived."

"With all of his teammates and mentors dead," Ash pointed out.

Sai coughed. "You can see why my heart was a heavy one."
Eventually, they got something of a handle on the advantages and limitations of their new bodies. Ash spent much of her time learning to use Muscovite's weapon, and modifying it to disable rather than to kill, although she had yet to manage any viruses less harmful than tear-gas.

Ash also trained to the point of being able to run away and dodge slightly more effectively than she could as a human, but she didn't get much out of physical training.

She actually spent most of her time helping Sai.

Sai had decided that, this time around, Clara Hart was going to be a brainiac. What started as Middle School Science Fair and Math Olympiad turned into skipping high school altogether and going straight to college. By the time she was twenty-one, Sai possessed a PhD in virology.

Sai confessed that, for the first time since she got out of school in her first life, she was actually... happy. Gems didn't really have the option of being a civilian researcher, apparently. Which Ash thought made sense, since they were probably so rare that they were all needed to be magical warriors against the forces of darkness.

Ash, reveling in the fact that she didn't need to breathe, spent most of her time underwater, and began to make inroads into Sai's extensive collection of fiction, fan- and otherwise.

Despite countless hours spent on the internet, however, Ash still couldn't find any mention of Four Stories Short. The author who would one day write her story (according to Sai) appeared to instead be going through a series of short stand-alone comics.

Ash spent the rest of the time writing, starting her four stories over from scratch, much to Sai's glee, who refused to tell her how they'd ended in Four Stories Short until Ash actually finished them on her own.

In addition, Ash wrote five or ten other novels, three of which were published as a trilogy. After that, she found herself bored.

"I've mined most of the experience that I have," she confessed to Sai, one night while they were both asleep. "What I need to do now is go out and make some new memories."

It was a little while after this point that Sai announced that Steven Universe had premiered on Cartoon Network, back in Clara Hart's world.

"Even I have to admit, it's not a bad show," said Sai. "Why don't you go join the Crystal Gems?" Sai suggested. "Then you could write about them."

Ash scoffed. "Because I've seen this storyline too many times, already. Living it won't give me any ideas that I'm not already familiar with."

Sai cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

Ash considered what she knew of Steven Universe.

She shook her head. "To be honest, I find the premise even less appealing than that of Adventure Time, and I'm no fan of that show, in the first place."

Sai took offense. "What's wrong with Adventure Time?" she demanded

Ash blinked, as she attempted to assemble a few paragraphs on the subject, before deciding that it
wasn't worth the effort and simply responded with, "The elephant exploded."

Sai shrugged. "She got better."

"Finn and Jake are BFF's, I'll give them that," said Ash, moving along with her original point. "Although, frankly, I've seen more than enough 'quirky fantasy' storylines to last me a lifetime. The leads are always annoying, thicker than a stack full of bricks, and supremely unremarkable.

"I saw the pilot for Steven Universe in my first life," Ash continued. "Based on the previews, I'd guessed that the three supporting characters were on a quest to find the clichéd 'Chosen One,' who was destined to save the world. It seemed like they were the wielders of three of the four magic gems needed to summon Captain Planet, who were waiting only for their fourth team member to fulfill their collective destinies and function as their leader."

"… and the magical fourth gem was found by a ten-year-old human child?" said Sai, starting to pick up on the chain of thought. "That's not exactly how it works, but I get where you're coming from."

Ash nodded, "Fine, perhaps the gem 'chose him' like the wands in Harry Potter? In any case, this forces the other three Crystal Gems to cater to the whims of their 'leader' and train his incompetent behind up to the point where he can unlock his magical Deus Ex Machina powers and sideline everyone else."

"I highly doubt that..." Sai started, feeling that she needed to make at least a token protest.

"You, I assume, were probably meant to be an antagonist," Ash continued, steamrolling over Sai's arguments, "if you appeared at all. Or perhaps having more than four Magical Gems is merely a consequence of living in a world where all this is reality and not fiction? There's no way to know for sure how things would have gone without the timeline swap."

"What did you think of the pilot?" asked Sai, deciding that she wasn't going to change Ash's mind, and just making small talk.

Ash sighed. "The other three 'Crystal Gems' seemed to cater to 'Steven Universe' to an extreme and almost subservient degree. I can't remember the specifics, but..."

"'We'll get these monsters out of your room,'" supplied Sai. "'We'll protect humanity until you can use your powers,' 'The only thing that matters is that Steven is happy.'"

"Thank you, Sai." Ash said, with a smile, before she cleared her throat and continued. "And what does the eponymous character do to earn all this respect? Why, be a naïve little twerp and rap about ice cream, of course—while the three of them laugh and applaud!" Ash sneered, shaking her head in disgust.

"I mean, really," said Ash, "those supporting characters were too good to just be sidelined like that! Is it too much to ask to have strong female characters? All three of them can't beat a monster by themselves without the kid to help them? Really? Seems like the writers are just railroading the plot along to keep their pet at the center of things. Wesley Crusher, anyone?"

"Wesley who?"

Ash turned to Sai in horror. "Are you telling me that your universe doesn't have Star Trek?!"

"Oh, that," said Sai. "No, it exists, I just never watched it."

Ash put a hand over her heart and sighed in relief. "Don't do that to me, Sai!"
Sai snickered. "Alright. Sorry. I do see your point of view... but consider this: your own life is fictional in this universe. What if someone here had had the power to prevent your death, but hadn't done so, simply because they weren't a fan of Four Stories Short?"

Ash put her head in her hands. "Damn you, Sai. I don't want to sympathize…"

Sai shrugged. "Fair enough, but can you do me a favor?" she handed over a flash drive. "This has the first two episodes on it, and this binder contains the first six volumes of Four Stories Short. Would you mind tracking the Gems down and explaining everything?"

Ash sighed, but she did store the items in her gem. "This isn't going to be something that I have to do every day, is it?"

Sai tilted her hand in an approximating gesture. "Once or twice a week, I'd guess, more if they want to see the previews. The previews for the first two episodes are on there, as well."

"Will do," Ash grumbled.
Chapter 3

Ash found a 'Warp Pad' and teleported to 'Beach City,' where Sai had told her the Crystal Gems resided. The corresponding Warp Pad that she rematerialized on was perched on a stone hand next to a washing machine. It was the middle of the night here, and not mid-afternoon, as it had been before Ash had left. Time lapse or location shift, then. Probably location shift, she decided.

Ash also decided that her favor to Sai was nothing that couldn't wait until morning, before leaping down to the beach and settling into a meditative pose.

Two hours later, while it was still pitch black, one of them found her.

"What are you doing here?" asked a low voice.

Ash startled out of her funk and opened her eyes to see that it was one of the Crystal Gems—she couldn't remember what any of their names were—and that she didn't look too happy to see her.

"I'm just the messenger," said Ash, holding up her hands in surrender. "Please, don't punch me."

The Gem folded her gauntleted arms across her chest.

Ash let the silence between them stretch on for a few moments, before deciding that she would have to be the one to break it.

Ash cleared her throat. "…may I tell you a story?"

"Sure," was the Gem's reply.

"Once upon a time," Ash began, unable to resist temptation, "there was a girl who died. She had led a fairly good life. At least, she thought so, anyway. When she arrived in the afterlife, however, her soul was judged as 'unbalanced' and the girl was sent back to the world of the living, to better develop her character—but nothing was ordinary about her new life.

"She had been sent back in the wrong body. It wasn't hers—it wasn't even human. This was intentional. Someone else had been sent back to live in her human body. The two saw each other each night when they slept. I'm Clara, the human. This body belongs to Muscovite, the Gem, who is currently in my human body back in my own universe."

"Sounds complicated," said the Gem.

"Our two dimensions exist in parallel with each other—Gems aren't even real, where I come from," Ash continued. "But, the biggest difference, by far, was the fact that in this world... I'm a fictional character."

She pulled out the binder, and a flashlight from her gem. "Apparently, Clara Hart is nothing more than a character in a webcomic called 'Four Stories Short.' I wasn't even the protagonist—the whole thing centered around the fact that I was dead. In all odds, my character was created specifically so that she could be killed.

"But stories can be rewritten. Sai—Muscovite, that is—she knew that my death was coming, and she avoided it. She's twenty-five now, when the story says that I died at twenty. The story is what it is, regardless of what actually happened—but without outside intervention, what happened in the story is what would have happened in reality."
"You said that you have a message?" asked the Gem. "Is it from 'Muscovite'?

"Yes." Ash pulled the flash drive from her gem and handed it over. "Here's the thing: in my world... there's actually a children's cartoon called 'Steven Universe.'"

The Gem took the drive.

"The first two episodes just aired," said Ash, "Which is strange because, in my first life, the show premiered when I was sixteen, but, whatever. Muscovite wanted me to show them to you. I never watched the series, except when I was babysitting and the kids wanted to see it, so I don't think I'll be of much help, but... you might find it useful?"

"We'll see."

Ash nodded. "I'll be back when the next episode airs."

She walked off into the sea, taking the long way home, and leaving the binder behind on the beach.

Garnet picked it up and walked back into the house.

The other Gems awoke to find Garnet, in the living room, reading from a large binder.

"Morning, Garnet," said Steven, "What's that?"

"Something horrible," was Garnet's reply.

When Steven was done with his breakfast, Garnet closed the book with a thud. She found Steven, Pearl, and Amethyst staring at her.

Garnet looked down at the flash drive in her hand and curled her fingers over it. "I need to go talk to Greg," she said.

"Greg?" said Pearl. "Why?"

"Ooh," said Amethyst, "This is gonna be good!"

They walked down to the Car Wash together, and waited until Greg was done dealing with his current customer before approaching.

"Hey, guys!" said Greg Universe, as he saw them. "What's up?"

"Hi, Dad!" said Steven. "I don't know, but Garnet wanted to talk to you!"

Garnet opened her hand, and Greg leaned closer to take a look.

"I don't know how this works," said Garnet.

Greg picked up the device. "Huh, looks like a thumb drive. Where did you get it?"

"Last night, I found another Gem just outside the house," said Garnet. "She did not seem completely... sane. She gave it to me."

"Another Gem?" said Steven, wide eyed and excited.

Pearl and Amethyst exchanged a wary glance.
Greg sucked in a breath. "That's... not necessarily a good thing, champ."

"Oh," said Steven. "Why not? Shouldn't Gems be friends with each other?"

"Not all Gems are necessarily as... nice as the Crystal Gems." He turned to Garnet. "You know, this thing is probably full of viruses."

"Probably," agreed Garnet.

Greg sighed. "...I think one of the old machines in the back is still working. It's not connected to anything, so if it gets fried, no big deal. Did she tell you what was on it?"

"She said that it was from an alternate universe where we're all characters in a children's cartoon," said Garnet.

"So, loco in the coco," said Amethyst.

"Maybe," said Garnet.

"Well, let's take a look," said Greg.

The five of them went to the back room. Greg plugged in one of the machines, and connected speakers, a keyboard, and a mouse.

He booted up the PC and plugged in the flash drive. The driver software installed while they waited.

"Three files, it looks like," said Greg, after a few minutes. "Wait, why does this folder have Steven's name on it?"

"Really?" said Steven. "What's in it?"

"Let's see!" said Greg, clicking on the icon.


"Episode one! Episode one!" chanted Steven.

"Here goes nothing," said Greg.

Eleven minutes later:

"HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?!" shrieked Pearl.

That cartoon wasn't exactly the way things had gone. It was more streamlined, edited down into an eleven-minute episode. But still, it was them. There was no denying it.

Soon after, they watched the second episode.

"Who was the Gem who gave this to you again?" asked Amethyst, uneasily.

"She said that she was a human trapped in the body of a Gem." Garnet opened the binder in her lap, which was titled 'Four Stories Short.'

"That's her," Garnet said, opening to the cover for the first volume.
"She's... fictional?" asked Pearl.

Garnet leaned back and looked thoughtful. "According to this, so are we."

The next week, when Ash knocked on the door, Steven was the only one in the house.

"Hey, it's you!" Steven said, as he recognized the Gem from Garnet's description of her.

"Hello," said Ash.

She offered him the flash drive and said, "Episode three."

"Oh, thanks," said Steven, brightly, "these are hilarious!"

"You're welcome," she said, with a tight smile. A moment later, she turned to leave.

"Hey, wait!" protested Steven, "Don't you want to watch it with us?"

Ash shook her head. "It's not really my cup of tea."

She strolled over to the Warp Pad, and then she was gone.

They watched the third episode.

The next week, Pearl was in the house when she heard the Warp Pad outside activate. She rushed out, only to see a figure walking out towards the mailbox. It was about to put an envelope into the box, when the other Gem spotted Pearl hurtling towards her.

She immediately raised her hands above her head and took a step back. "I was just leaving."

"No, you're not," said Pearl. "Not until you explain where you're getting those— those things that you keep bringing here!"

Ash shrugged. "I'm just the messenger, it's Muscovite who's putting all of this together."

"So you admit you've been spying on us?" said Pearl, suspiciously.

"I admit to nothing," said Ash.

Pearl, unconvinced, pulled a spear from her forehead and leveled it at the other Gem. "Come with me," she commanded.

Ash followed.

By then, the rest of the Gems were just getting back from the Big Donut.

"Clara," said Garnet. "Nice to see you again.

"Ha! So the mystery Gem actually does exist!" crowed Amethyst. "Good job catching it, Pearl!"

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh!" said Steven. "You're from a world where we're TV stars!"

"Hello," said Ash, both monumentally uncomfortable with the situation and incredibly glad that she'd started wearing a tube top. Regardless of what rants Sai might have put her through about how the
censorship of female nipples was a sign of society's deeply-ingrained sexism, Ash knew that she would never be comfortable being shirtless in public.

Ash handed over the flash drive, which she hadn't had time to put in the mailbox earlier. "This is yours," she said.

"Thanks," said Garnet.

Ash nodded and turned to leave.

"Hold on!"

"Pearl, let her go," said Garnet.

"Are you sure you don't want to watch with us?" asked Steven.

"I..." Ash paused, deciding how best to phrase her opinion on the matter without crushing the dreams of a small child, "I wasn't exactly interested in the show when I thought that it was fiction. Now that I know it is, to a large extent, reality, it becomes unappealing for a whole 'nother set of reasons."

"What?" asked Steven, completely lost.

Ash nodded in Pearl's direction. "She thought that I must have been spying on you, to learn everything that was in the show. That gives me some idea about the amount of personal information included. I think that it's useful for you to see it, so that you'll have some warning, if your author decides to do something awful to you, or to take the story in a dark direction... but it's not something that I want, or need, to see for myself."

Garnet frowned. "You weren't interested in watching 'our show'?

"Ah, sorry," said Ash, fluttering her hands, worried that she might have given offense. "Nothing personal, I've just seen too many stories with similar plot lines... and, I'm not a huge fan of Cartoon Network, to begin with—that's the channel that your show airs on. I did a lot of babysitting in high school, and I saw more than enough cartoons to last me a lifetime.

"I watched the first episode with some of the kids, you know," said Ash, well and truly on a tangent, "and I decided, after a single episode, that the show wasn't for me. I've seen a few more episodes, also while babysitting, which confirmed this opinion."

"Which episodes?" asked Garnet, in curiosity.

"Well, for example—" Ash began, and then paused. "Hang on, do you care about spoilers?"

"I have no problem with learning of potential futures," Garnet assured her. Light glinted off her sunglasses, as she adjusted them.

"I saw the episode with Frybo," said Ash. "Why must Cartoon Network persist in terrifying young children? That french fry costume was unnecessarily terrifying and creepy. And it just smacks of Flapjack, Chowder, and the Amazing World of Gumball. There's so much they could do with a fantasy-adventure premise, and they're throwing it all away on vaguely existential ten-year-olds, non-sequitur nightmare-fuel villains, and nudity-based humor? I always hate it when writers run out of ideas and just start handing people the idiot ball. Plus, as a kid, I was always terrified of the Dr. Seuss book about the sentient pants. After this? I'm sure that I wasn't the only one."

"Is that all?" asked Garnet.
"Uh," Ash scoured her memory for details which she'd had no interest in at the time, "most of the others I saw were fragments. I saw part of the episode where Steven gets one of his friends stuck in a magic bubble, but only the beginning. I saw the end of an episode where you guys became professional wrestlers—not really sure where that came from, but I was kind of surprised that that sort of violence got past the censors. There was the end of a personal drama episode where you all went to the arcade, but I don't remember any specifics about that one. I think maybe one of you got hypnotized by a DDR machine?

"The next full episode I saw was the standard 'you can't use a magical time-travel artifact to solve all your problems' Aesop... that also made light of killing off your alternate-timeline counterparts. Seemed too much like the creepier parts of Adventure Time, to tell you the truth. Was this humor just designed to make people uncomfortable? Is it too much to ask to inhabit a universe that actually explores existential questions instead of exploiting them? Yeah, I've heard that Adventure Time has started to develop something like a continuity and a framework. Supposedly, the whole thing takes place after an apocalyptic 'Mushroom War,' but," she shook her head. "If I couldn't take post-apocalyptic fantasy seriously in Sword of Shanara or Dragonriders of Pern, then I'm most certainly not going to accept it in a slapped-together children's cartoon."

"Amethyst bristled. "Who are you calling 'slapped together'?"

"That's the last of what you've seen?" Garnet interjected.

"Almost," said Ash. "The last episode that I saw was a two-parter which seemed to imply that the Crystal Gems are somewhat morally ambiguous. I don't remember everything that happened, but it seemed like you were holding an innocent Gem prisoner? Probably for some sort of Dumbledore-esque 'greater good.' Possibly this 'greater good' even involved creating Gem Monsters in the first place a la Madoka Magica? I hadn't seen any of the recent episodes, so I had no idea what was going on."

Ash shrugged. "The Mirror Gem was okay, as a character, but Steven's healing powers seemed to have come completely out of nowhere. Wasn't he supposed to have a shield? When exactly did he become a white mage? I suppose I could have just gone back and watched the earlier episodes, but I was also fairly certain that this show was turning into a train-wreck, one which I didn't want to stick around to watch."

She started pacing. "Beginnings are usually formulaic," said Ash, "and that's forgivable, expected even. But I have very little patience for shows which keep relying on cliché and overwrought tropes in lieu of developing their own worlds, characters, and conflicts to keep things interesting.

"I don't need to see another 'generic hero goes on a lighthearted series of generic adventures, over which he gradually discovers a generic conspiracy of which even his closest allies are a part.' Those types of stories often throw away any semblance of sense to end with a shocking conclusion that will ruin all happiness retroactively and end in a dark and depressing manner."

She waved a hand. "And please, let's not have any more of this tired, 'my friends have become my enemies,' nonsense. Yes, it's efficient in the sense that having your friends also serve as your enemies saves on time and character development, but it leaves a very bad taste in the mouth, and is rarely handled with any degree of grace or believability. I had more than enough of that with The Dark is Rising and its 'Light is not Good' moralizing.

"In short: farewell, Steven Universe. I barely knew you, and now I never will."

The silence of the four other people in the room was suddenly the loudest thing that Ash had heard all day. She turned to see them staring at her, shock written across their features.
"I get healing powers?" said Steven. "Cool!"

"Mirror... Gem?" said Amethyst.

Ash frowned in concentration "I think it was..." she pointed to Pearl. "I believe it was something that you had?"

Pearl produced a mirror from her gem, Garnet immediately bubbled the mirror and sent it to the temple.

"That was close," she remarked.

"Yeah," Ash grimaced. "It's your life, and I won't stop you from making your own choices... but I don't really feel comfortable being a part of this."

"What?" said Pearl, outraged. "That Gem was clearly cracked. It wasn't alive anymore. If it was taken out of the mirror, it would have become a Gem monster!"

"Okay?" said Ash, having absolutely no clue what any of that meant.

"We don't create gem monsters," Garnet explained. "They're the product of an ancient Gem war. We merely contain them, so that they can't hurt people."

"That's... slightly reassuring," Ash admitted. "Do you need anything else?"

"No," said Garnet.

She nodded, and turned to go.

"Clara?" said Garnet.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

She smiled, ever so slightly. "Call me Ash."

With that, she stepped onto the pad and warped out.
A few more weeks passed, during which Ash—having finished her read-throughs of *Flatland* and *Egyptian and Mesopotamian Mythology*—decided to re-watch Star Trek: The Original Series.

And Sai was trying to convince her to watch something else, altogether.

"Ash, the show is capable of being genuinely heartwarming."

"Hooray," Ash enthused, as she lay on her stomach, absently leafing through a doorstopper of a fantasy novel. "I'm still not watching Steven Universe."

She did, however, decide to give the show's characters a chance. After all, maybe the show was different in a universe where it was actually real?

Ash Warped over to Beach City for a visit, and arrived just in time to see Steven morphing into— … into a giant ball of cats?

Nevermind, Ash thought, backing slowly away. She'd been right the first time.

Although, as the months wore on, things *did* seem to be taking a turn for the serious. While Ash acknowledged, morally speaking, that Sai's plan was the right thing to do, it was becoming an increasingly difficult course of action to follow through on.

Where, initially, Ash had been greeted with no small amount of hostility… well, these days Pearl accepted flash-drives with a blank and dreadful stare; Steven was always subdued and nervous, though he obviously tried to remain upbeat and happy; and Amethyst usually left the room whenever she entered.

Garnet was as tranquil as ever, but… Ash still kind of felt like she was showing Winnie the Pooh a war documentary. Or convincing Putt Putt the purple car that souls didn't exist.

It wasn't necessarily their fault that they couldn't handle the ramifications of realizing that their lives were, by some accounts, fictional. They were simple characters designed for a simple world.

Then, one day, she arrived at the house to find it completely empty.

Well, fair enough. She placed the thumb drive on the kitchen counter in a bowl containing spare keys, and then she left.

Seven episodes later and the bowl was overflowing. Ash didn't tell Sai. It was too early to be certain that anything had happened.

Three episodes after that, and Ash found a note stuck to the refrigerator, along with a crystalline flute.

The note read, *'Play Me.'*

Deciding to go for it, Ash raised the flute to her lips and played the first few notes of 'Ode to Joy.'
A few moments later, the Warp Pad activated and Pearl appeared.

"Ah, Ash, there you are. Well, better late than never. If you'll follow me?"

"All right," said Ash.

She followed Pearl to the Warp Pad and the two of them disappeared in a flash, rematerializing in what looked, at first glance, like a theme park that had been designed by Stanley Kubrick. It was clearly supposed to be a festive place, but was too utilitarian and sleek to fool anyone who knew what fun actually looked like.

At one end of the room were three thrones, upon which sat three Gems. One, Ash recognized straight off as the Mirror Gem. The second was green and had fingers which did not appear to be connected to her hands. The third was orange and nearly taller than the first two combined.

Ash was immediately reminded of a conversation she’d had with her roommate a few weeks ago:

"Ash," Sai began, looking uncomfortable, "There are things you don't know... about Gems."

"Obviously," said Ash. "I've been ignoring all of them."

"No, but," Sai shook her head. "The show is much truer to life than you give it credit for."

"How so?" asked Ash.

"There are things that I haven't mentioned before now," said Sai, "because I didn't want to bring up the past, but... did you know that Gems are aliens?"

"Huh," said Ash, "well, I guess I sort of realized, when Lapis Lazuli flew off into space, but I never really thought about it."

"Well, we're not just aliens, we're hostile aliens."

Ash blinked. "In retrospect, that makes a lot of sense. What's your story?"

"I was Cultivar Muscovite," said Sai, suddenly looking a thousand years away. "It was my job to scout out a planet, kill all the organic life with my viruses, and then signal the fleet that the world was theirs for the taking."

"Sai."

"Yes?"

"Are you saying that you're Invader Zim?"

"Heh. No. Earth was to be my fourth assignment. If I was invader I was Tak. I was sent on my mission about one point five thousand years ago. After which I promptly faked my own death and settled in to study your genome and native life, something I'd never had the opportunity to do before."

"So, you're saying that the rest of your race is still out there, even if they don't necessarily appear in the cartoon show?"

Sai shook her head. "Ash, they're starting to appear in Steven Universe."
"Huh. Very Sergeant Frog. I take it the Gems have to carry out the farce that they're invaders of Earth, so that the Homeworld doesn't send in reinforcements?"

"Not... exactly. As far as I know, the Crystal Gems were invaders, but they staged a rebellion five thousand years ago and drove the Homeworld off of Earth."

"... I believe that it happened," said Ash, "but there is no part of me that can believe it would be included in a children's cartoon."

Sai shrugged. "Regardless of whether it appears in the show, you'll have to deal with it. As far as the Homeworld is concerned, you're as much a traitor as any of the Crystal Gems."

"I refuse to be railroaded into anything," said Ash, "... but I'll keep my guard up."

All things considered, Ash could be forgiven for her first thought being that the Crystal Gems had rejoined the Empire, and that she herself was about to die.

She froze, and Pearl continued on without her. For a few steps, at least. After that, she noticed, and looked back to Ash with a puzzled expression.

Ash forced herself to resume walking, as Pearl led her over to where the rest of the Crystal Gems were standing, near the front of the crowd.

A crowd which was roiling with dissonance and discontent.

At least it was—until the green Gem reformed her hand into a ray gun and blasted it randomly into the mass of people.

Ash followed the beam with her eyes, and saw it hit a tall blue Gem in the back. In a flash of light and smoke, the gem was gone.

Well, no, that wasn't exactly true. The gemstone seemed to hang in the air for a moment, before dropping to the floor, but the person associated with the gem seemed to have been completely vaporized, and that was the important thing.

All eyes turned to the three Gems on the thrones.

"Any other objections to your new Diamonds?" rumbled the orange Gem. The green Gem raised her arm away from the crowd, but didn't move her fingers back to their normal conformation. The blue Gem drew a sphere of water from a basin beside her throne and began shaping it, idly.

"No, my Diamonds," said a Gem who vaguely resembled Pearl.

"Good," said the green Gem. (Green Diamond?) "Then we have a few announcements. The Crystal Gems are hereby recognized as an allied empire, with territories consisting of Earth and the rest of the Crystal System. The Cluster Geoweapon, currently hosted in the Earth's mantle, is to be removed and incubated in an uninhabited planet, under the supervision of Orange Diamond, who shall henceforth take charge of all military operations."

"Blue Diamond," and here the blue Gem looked up, "shall be the ultimate authority on Law and matters of justice," the green Gem continued.

"And Green Diamond?" Blue Diamond asked.

"Research," she said. "Our current Kindergarten schematics are unsustainable."
About an hour of long-winded speeches later the Diamonds ordered the rest of the Gems out of the chamber, save for the Four Crystal Gems, and Ash.

"I don't like you," said Green Diamond. "I don't trust your motives, and I don't appreciate your reliance on emotion."

"You held me prisoner," said Blue Diamond. "Releasing me doesn't atone for that."

"You can't trust a traitor," said Orange Diamond. "If they'll betray once, they'll betray again."

"Still," said Green Diamond, "There is no need for us to come into conflict. Yet. Logically, cooperation is the best course of action to start with."

"Sounds like a plan," said Garnet. The four Crystal Gems (and Ash) headed back to the Warp Pad.

"Peridot, Lapis, Jasper…" said Garnet, "Good luck."

With that, the Warp Pad activated, and they disappeared.

When they arrived back in the Crystal Gems' living room, they all began talking amongst themselves. Ash, not in the mood to try and make sense of any of it, moved over to the window and gazed outside, tuning them out for a few minutes, until her own name was called.

"Yes?" she said, turning back to face the group.

"What did you think?" asked Garnet.

"Of the ceremony? Well, first off, what was it, and what did it have to do with me?"

Pearl looked concerned. "You truly know nothing of Homeworld?"

Ash frowned. "Muscovite's Homeworld? I know a little about her personal history, but not much about the society that she came from. Does it matter?"

"Not for you," Garnet admitted. "But it will to Muscovite. Tell her about this, the next time you see her."

"Can do," said Ash. "Anything else I should know?"

Garnet shrugged. "From this point on, we should be fine. You don't need to bring us episodes, anymore. In fact, it's probably best if you focus on your own problems. You and Muscovite have another six months, at the most, before your judges decide to bring you back for retrial."

Ash looked at her suspiciously. "And how do you know that?"

Garnet tapped a finger against her temple. "I can see the future."

Ash paused. "Then exactly what good has any of this done for you?" she asked, waving a hand at the bowl overflowing with flash drives.

"I see the future—not the present, and certainly not the past," said Garnet. "Having a clearer picture of which pieces of the present will affect the future gives me a greater degree of control over future outcomes. The Week of Sardonyx? Never happened in this universe. Jailbreak? We never even got that far. Incidentally, Steven?"
"Yeah?" he said.

"Would you like to meet Ruby and Sapphire?"

"Really?!"

"You bet." With that, Garnet split apart into two tiny gems. One was red, the other blue.

"Hey, Steven!" said the red Gem.

"It's nice to finally meet, face to face," said the blue Gem.

"Oh my gosh," said Steven. "I thought I was prepared for this moment, but I thought wrong!"

Ash, who was thoroughly unsettled, by this point, had moved back to stand with Pearl and Amethyst, the latter of whom caught her eye.

"What was that?" asked Ash, eyeing Steven and the two small gems, as the three of them conversed excitedly.

Amethyst was surprised. "You mean you really don't—oh. Human. Right," she said, in realization. "Okay," said Amethyst. "So, people are made outta lots of different parts, right?"

Vague, but true. Ash nodded.

"Ever seen a comic book where a superhero gets split into the different pieces of their personality?" Amethyst asked. "Light and dark? Happy and sad? Brave and scared?"

"Not a huge fan of comics, but I've seen that scenario in fantasy novels, yeah," said Ash. "So, those two are the components of Garnet's personality?" she said, nodding to indicate Ruby and Sapphire, who were happily chatting away with Steven. "Are they her Logic and her Emotion?"

"Sorta," said Amethyst, "but not exactly. Okay, this is where things get complicated. At the end of most comic books, the goal is to join the personality facets into one mind again, right? Now, instead of that, imagine that you've got two people. They've been separate people all their lives, but you decide to treat these two different people like they were parts of a larger personality. So you use magic and fuse the two Gems into one new Gem, and that's Fusion."

Ash could only stare. "Tuvix," she said.

"What?" said Amethyst.

"I think I get it," said Ash. "Sai has a lot of explaining to do," she added, in an undertone.

"Ash, look," said Pearl.

"What?" asked Ash, pulling her head from her hands, only to see 'Ruby' and 'Sapphire' begin a dance, both of their gems aglow. A moment later, Garnet was back.

"Huh," said Ash. "So, any two Gems can do this?"

Amethyst tilted her head. "What makes you think we're limited to two?"

Ash's brain shorted out at the implications.

"…can a Gem fuse with a human?" she asked, eventually.
"I can!" said Steven. "But I think that's because I'm half-human, already."

Ash filed that away for later, before turning to Garnet. "You said that I should focus on my own problems, but… I'm not even sure what my problems are. At this point, I'm more of the opinion that I'm fine and it's the rest of the universe that's mistaken."

"I know the feeling," allowed Garnet. "But most positive futures branching out from this point involve you investigating the connection between yourself and Muscovite."

"Sai?" said Ash, caught off-guard. "She has a heavy heart; I have a light one. We're fictional in each other's universes. Or at least, we were the first time around. Come to think of it, I haven't actually been able to find Four Stories Short in this timeline. That's something I should probably investigate."

"I agree," said Garnet.

Ash sighed. "Looks like I'm off to find a computer…"

"We have one!" said Steven. "You can borrow it!"

Ash tried to come up with a polite way to say that, perhaps, she didn't want to search for her life's story with an audience, but then she took one look at the eager expression on Steven's face and folded like a house of cards in a windstorm.

"Thanks," said Ash, weakly. "That'd be great."

With that, they all made a trip down to the Car Wash.

"So, what are we doing again?" asked Greg, who didn't have anything better to do.

"Looking for my tragic backstory," said Ash, as she cracked Muscovite's wrist joints and began typing into the search bar.

"Four Stories Short should have been a webcomic started by Sam Fletcher almost four years ago," Ash began. "Instead, his current story is," she pulled up his homepage, "—a romantic comedy about centaurs." She blinked at how very tasteless an idea that was. "Okay, fair enough, but Sai gave you guys a copy of the original story." She said, noticing the folder on the desktop named 'Steven Universe.'

"Huh," said Ash, as she stared at the high resolution of the file. "This is the official release. The copy I read was pirated. Why would she have pirated it, if she was just going to buy it, anyway?"

She shook her head. "Ah, whatever, this version seems to have more information, anyway."

Ash pulled up the first volume and began to skim the introduction scrolling past the few short paragraphs of thanks and dedications, and instead looking at the authors notes.

"Born in the southeast, yadda, yadda, yadda, People ask me where I got the idea for the story—here we go! 'In truth, the whole thing is built around a chance meeting five years ago. Her name was Mica, and she sparkled like the sun on the waves. When I saw her, she was giddy with joy over a story she'd just finished."

"'Finished reading?' I asked. 'No, finished writing,' she informed me, as she pulled out a manuscript and hugged it to her chest. We spoke, and it couldn't have been for more than a few minutes, about fiction and its ability to captivate. One moment she was there. I looked away, and she was gone. I
never saw her again, but the image of a bright young writer, enchanted by her craft, stayed with me
for months. Eventually her light and levity found new life in Clara Hart, Muse of this very comic.
Wherever Mica is today, I'm sure she's doing well. And that same hope extends to all young writers
out there. The world needs your hope and your laughter, and I personally wish you all the
best!" Ash finished, lapsing into silence.

"Mica?" said Pearl. "Sounds like a Gem name. Not anyone I know, but, still."

Ash opened a new tab and brought up Wikipedia. "Mica," she read, after finding the appropriate
article. "The Mica group of sheet silicate minerals… influenced by 'micare' which means 'to glitter'…
common Micas include Biotite, Lepidolite… and Muscovite."

The others were silent, as Ash turned to face them with a heavy spirit. "I suppose I should ask…
what happened to Muscovite in the cartoon? Sai hasn't told me anything."

Garnet and Amethyst exchanged a glance. "Muscovite has not yet appeared in-show. Nor have we
met her. To the best of my knowledge 'Muscovite,' as a cut of Gem, does not exist."

Ash frowned. "Wait… that can't be right. Sai has a whole folder of Muscovite fanfiction on her
laptop!"

She pulled a flashdrive from her Gem and downloaded the mentioned epubs. "Granted, it's only,
like, ten stories, but—" She noticed something. "Alright, I'm fairly certain that 'OC' stands for
'Original Character' not 'Orange County.' Muscovite appears to be a popular fan-character."

She scrolled up and down the page, making sure of her findings. "The oldest incarnation of which is
from a little over a year ago" She clicked on the story to open it.

"'Steven has faced many trials and tribulations as a Crystal Gem, and overcome them all.' Ash
read, "Now, everything he's worked for and everyone he's sworn to protect hangs in the balance, as
he battles an enemy with the power over disease itself. Will Steven master his healing powers and
defeat the evil Muscovite? Or will he crack under the pressure? Find out in my debut fanfic "Steven
Universe and the Game of Glitter"! Now revised and edited!

"…Written by CanaUrDrunk37.' Alright, then. I really hope that Sai hasn't been writing fanfiction
about herself. But, if she has, then she and I are going to have a very long talk about what is and isn't
healthy."

She scrolled down the Authors Notes. "One of the most frequent questions I get in reviews is about
the inspiration for Muscovite," Ash read, aloud. "People have sent me PM's which seem completely
certain that she's an expy of Hannibal Lecter or Irene Alder. One reviewer even thought she was an
homage to Frankenstein. The truth is nothing so glamorous, because Muscovite is basically just an
old roommate I had back in college who scared the crap outta me. She was a scholarship genius
who spent all her time watching tv instead of doing homework. For me, Steven Universe was never
complete without her cynical comments picking apart the story. She scared me more than Jasper
and Peridot combined, and let me tell you, that is saying something. Problem was, her personality
didn't fit with any of the major villains, so I decided to invent one especially for her, and that was the
birth of Muscovite."

"A roommate, hmm?" Ash looked at the next chapter's author's notes. "This writer goes to college in
the northeast. That fits." Next authors note. "Has two brothers. Has a grandfather who worked in the
Navy…"

Ash sat back. "I do believe that the author of this fanfic is Anita Darkle, one of the kids I used to
babysit, back in high school."

Ash swallowed, then pushed back her chair and stood.

"I have to show this to Sai."

She turned to leave the room, a blank expression pasted across her face.

"Ash!" called Garnet.

She stopped. "Yes?"

"If all goes well, then you probably won't see us again," said Garnet. "This is goodbye."

"Good luck!" said Pearl. Amethyst waved.

"Thanks," said Ash, vaguely

"And Ash?" said Garnet.

"Yeah?" said Ash, not bothering to turn around this time.

"Watch the show," said Garnet.

She did look back at that remark, to see the rest of the Gems and Greg nodding in agreement. Steven gave her a thumbs up.

"I'll consider it," she allowed.

She paused, if this really was the last she'd see of them… might as well go out with a bang.

Normally, she didn't like screwing around with her own brain, shape-shifting abilities or no, but this was a special occasion. She needed to sleep and she needed to sleep now, so Ash focused on one particular part of her mind which Sai had trained her to control, and shifted it.

She was asleep before she hit the ground, and vanished from the world almost before she'd fallen asleep.

"Where'd she go?" asked Steven.

"Hopefully, to a better place," said Garnet.

For a moment, they stood there in contemplative silence, which was broken when Pearl noticed what a certain purple Gem was reading.

"Amethyst!" said Pearl, sounding scandalized.

"What?" asked Amethyst, from her seat at the computer, where she had *Game of Glitter* open. "I can't be the only one who's curious!"

Pearl turned to the other Gem for support. "Garnet…"

Said Gem adjusted her glasses. "It should be safe," she said, settling down on chair beside Amethyst.

"Story time! Story time!" chanted Steven, pulling up a chair also.
Greg wandered over to read over Amethyst's shoulder.

Pearl sighed. "Fine," she said, moving over to read as well.

"Ahem," Amethyst cleared her throat. "Chapter One: A New Enemy…"
"I have so many questions," Ash said, her voice dull with shock.

"I have so many answers," was Sai's gentle reply.

Ash shook her head. "I... that... Gems are aliens."


"I'm glad you finally realize what we're dealing with."

Sai closed the laptop she'd been typing into and gave the other girl her full attention.

Ash's hands trembled. "So, wait... the Crystal Gems are the only good Gems?"

Sai considered the question. "For a given value of 'good', yes. Certainly, from a human perspective. From the Empire's point of view, however, they're something like a militarized version of the ASPCA."

Ash leaned heavily against the wall. "I don't... I can't..."

Sai reached out tentatively and placed a hand on her shoulder, in a vaguely comforting gesture. "It's all right. We don't have to hash everything out right this second."

Ash nodded, wordlessly, then stumbled over to her bed, where she faceplanted, her mind spinning at a hundred miles an hour.

When she finally gathered her thoughts together, there was one question foremost in her mind. "Sai, when you talked about combining souls... was that Fusion?"

Sai nodded. "Normally, it is possible only between Gems. But I am a Gem in the body of a human and you are a human in the body of a Gem. It may be possible for us to do it."

"Now?" said Ash.

Sai hesitated. "Well, it is helped by an emotional bond of some sort, but... well, we can certainly try it." She held out a hand.

Ash stood and took it, pulling herself to her feet.

"Do you dance?" Sai asked.

"No," Ash answered. The closest she'd ever gotten was DDR, and she'd never been any good at that, either.

"Slowly it is, then," she said, clasping Ash's waist with her other arm. Ash did the same with Sai's shoulder. "Try and match the way I move my feet." In her peripheral vision, she could see her Gem begin to glow, slightly.

Sai took the lead, saying, "One, two, three, one, two, three, and—dip!" with that, Ash leaned back, putting all her weight on Sai's arms. And Sai must have worked out a heck of a lot more than Ash ever did, because Clara Heart's arms supported Muscovite's weight with only the slightest of
tremblings.
But nothing happened.

They stayed like that for a few seconds, but still, nothing.

Sai sighed. "Of course, it wouldn't be that easy."

She pulled Ash back to her feet and the two of them sat down on Sai's bed.

"Well, I've run across very few things in my life that couldn't be solved with the right virus. I suppose I should ask, are you opposed to turning your human body into a Gem-human hybrid?"

"Like Steven?"

Sai shook her head. "Nothing so elegant. It would be a hack-job: grafting fragments of my Gem onto Clara Hart's body in the hopes of making it fusion-compatible."

"Well, we are both dead. We don't exactly have a lot to lose, at this point."

Sai shrugged. "If you're for it, then the virus you're looking for should be saved as 'MajiinGluu48'"

Ash summoned the indicated virus-grenade. She held it in her hand, a moment, not entirely certain on whether she wanted to go through with it.

Sai reached over, crushed the grenade, then leaned forward to inhale the fragments.

"Give it a few minutes and we'll try again," she said.

Ash nodded, and pulled out a book to read.

Half an hour later, they once again clasped hands, and Sai led the dance. This time, Ash's gem wasn't the only one glowing. Sai had what looked like an uneven scab on her own cheek, which glimmered dimly.

When Sai dipped her this time, the glow became brighter, and then blinding

When it dimmed back down, she, no they, were abruptly shorter, still with their adult proportions, but now about the size of a human four-year-old. They were still camouflage-patterned, but now with a much lighter green, white, and gray. Also, unlike before, the camouflage patterns were much closer to tessellations, especially on their cape. They still had the cape, by the way, but now, much to Ash's relief, they sported a tube-top as part of their natural outfit. Though, they paid for the extra fabric with the fact that their pants now cut off at the knee, leaving their legs uncovered.

"What is this?" asked Ash.

"This... is our fusion," said Sai, "Do you remember our name?"

They frowned. "It's... Celadon," she said, not sure how she knew it, but certain that it was true. "We're Celadon."

Celadon crouched down and closed her eyes in meditation.

Within her mind, the parts of her that had been Sai and Ash conversed.
"Why are we shorter now?" Ash asked. "The other two got shorter when they split and taller when they combined."

Sai shook her head in bewilderment. "I don't know, but... well normally Gems can't fuse with humans at all. Maybe, since we're so incompatible physically, we're getting destructive interference instead of constructive interference? We still only have the one Gem, after all. That would indicate a human/Gem Fusion."

"How do we stop? Are we going to be stuck like this forever?"

The possibility repulsed the two of them so much that they unfused on the spot.

Though she was now taller than they had been as Celadon, Ash was immediately convinced that something was wrong. She was too short, as if she hadn't regained all of her height. She also felt hot, as though she suddenly had a fever.

She looked at Sai, to make sure that the other girl was alright.

And abruptly realized what the difference was.

Sai was a Gem again.

And she, Ash realized, as she looked down at her hands, was human.

They were, both of them, back in their original bodies.

Ash's legs collapsed underneath her in relief. She caught herself with her hands before she could fall completely to the floor while, next to her, Sai laughed like a madwoman.
"Sai?" said Ash, carefully.

"Yeah?" said Sai, still chuckling intermittently and looking happier than Ash had ever seen her.

Ash paused. Even if she hadn't been in her body for the last decade or so, something still didn't feel right. "Have you had a fever all day?"

Sai's expression immediately became panicked. "Oh my God, I am so sorry."

Ash just looked confused.

"It's a side effect," Sai explained. "Of the virus."

That brought Ash up short as the pieces fell into place. "You've been in constant pain for the last hour, haven't you?"

Sai fidgeted, looking uncomfortable. "Well, in my defense, I didn't think you would ever find out. Can I fix it?"

Yes, please, thought Ash. "Be my guest."

Sai formed another grenade, crushed it, and held the powder out to Ash. She seemed to be adapting to having her old body back a lot better than Ash was. Then again, she'd lived in her original body for far longer than Ash had lived in hers.

"Breathe in," Sai instructed.

As Ash did so, Sai flicked her wrist, sending glitter swirling into the air.

Once the coughing fit had died down, Ash realized that she was, indeed, feeling worlds better than she had previously. Which raised the question of why Sai had felt the need to put up with such discomfort in the first place.

"Were you by any chance planning to remain in excruciating pain, because I had inadequate control over your powers?" asked Ash. She hadn't thought Sai was a glutton for punishment. Was this some sort of 'pride in her workmanship' thing?

"More like, I didn't want you to feel bad if you maimed me by accident," Sai muttered, before realizing she was speaking aloud, and clearing her throat. "What I just did—it's not a difficult patch to make—but it's not something you want to do for your first project. MG48 isn't really something you want to go messing around with."

Ash sighed. So it was because of her own incompetence, then. Great. It wasn't like she thought she'd mastered Sai's weapon or anything, but to not even be told about a problem because it was just assumed she wouldn't be able to solve it...

"Speaking of," Sai continued, oblivious to Ash's self-doubt, "now that we're back in our original bodies, should I remove my gem fragments from your system?"

"Why?" asked Ash, confused. Wouldn't that defeat the whole purpose of grafting them on in the first place?
Sai hesitated. "You've seen Invader Zim?"

"Yeah?" said Ash, still not sure where this was going.

"Gems are Paks," Sai said, and stilled, carefully watching Ash's reaction to her words.

Ash blinked. "You're saying that… *Muscovite* is your brain and your life support, and your body is just *something to carry your gem around*?"

Sai nodded. "Yes."

"Yes," Ash draw back, reeling just the slightest bit. "…and you fragmented yourself." It was one thing to know that Sai was destructive, but it was another to realize that that extended into *self-destruction*.

"Yes," Sai agreed, flat and unreadable. "Yes, I did."

Well, that was going to be a whole 'nother mess of implications to sort through. Where to even start? "Will there be personality contamination or something, if they're not removed?" asked Ash, nervously, considering the many, *many* ways this could go wrong.

"There shouldn't be," said Sai, sobering, "but seeing as my Gem is *me*, and I retain control over all pieces of myself... well, some people might find it creepy."

"Well, psychically, we're pretty much the same person, anyway," Ash pointed out. And boy would that be an uncomfortable conversation, whenever they got around to having it. Someday, but sure as hell not today, Ash decided.

Sai straightened. "True," she replied, her face carefully neutral.

What to do, what to do? On the one hand, Sai had kept things from her, assumed that Ash's default state was incompetence, and had a worrying fascination with deadly viruses and diseases. On the other hand, Sai seemed to genuinely care about helping her old world, even if it was done in the most blunt and harsh manner possible. Also, she was funny, Ash supposed, and could be a decent teacher when she put the effort in.

And she was trying. That was something. She and Ash didn't usually agree on subjects like morality or the value of kindness, but cooperation was a two way street. Sai showed consistent willingness to compromise, if a deadlock was reached, or to make concessions, if there was something Ash considered a deal-breaker.

Might as well try to meet her halfway.

"Leave the fragments, Sai," Ash decided, after her initial flash of disgust had died down. "We'll probably need Celadon again before all this is over."

Sai paused. "Speaking of. Ash?"

Ash looked up in interest. "What?" They weren't done yet?

"What do you think would happen if we went to sleep as Celadon?" said Sai, looking intrigued, as though it were a purely academic question, one which didn't affect either of them in the least.

"I... I don't know," said Ash, taken completely off guard. If Clara Hart went to Earth when she slept, and Muscovite went to *Steven's Universe*, then where would their amalgamation go when she fell unconscious?
If nothing else, it might give them an escape route.

This time, Ash was the one to offer a hand to Sai.

Once the Gem had taken it, Ash darted around Sai, pulling her around into a spin.

Sai caught on, and began to match her, running in a circle.

"Three," said Ash, turning the run into a slide, and bending her elbow to bring her closer to Sai, increasing her rotational speed.

"Two," said Sai, following suit, their speed increased still more.

There was a flash of light.

"One," said Celadon, as she slowly spun to a stop.

Celadon sat down on the floor, closed her eyes in what could have been meditation... and awoke a few minutes later on what appeared to be an abandoned spacecraft.

She smiled at the sight of the utterly unfamiliar surroundings.

"Jackpot," said the Fusion.
Chapter 7

Celadon explored.

As she walked the corridors of the ship and took in the architecture and color scheme, things started to seem familiar, but not in a reassuring sense. More like a horror movie seen at too young an age, revisited as an adult, than like anything optimistic.

Strangely, the onboard computer was voice activated and seemed to understand English.

Another flash of familiarity washed through Celadon. But all this told her was that, if this place was fiction, then it was probably a less cynical flavor of science fiction. This didn't look like a human ship, after all, and the presence of universal translators usually indicated softer sci-fi. Which was the opposite impression she was getting from everything else, but she'd reserve judgment for now.

When she found the bridge, this contradiction became slightly clearer.

The crew of the spacecraft appeared to have all been androids, five of them, which were inactive on the bridge.

They looked just like dead Xenomorphs—which Sai had never seen—but they were wearing uniforms of the Romulan Empire, both of which were easily recognized by the part of Celadon that was Ash.

Star Trek, then, she decided, with a touch of Alien thrown in for good measure. And, if these were the Romulans, then what were the Vulcans of this universe like?

She made her way through the ship. If there was anyone functional, well Celadon certainly couldn't find them. Though, the fact that no one was answering on the comm wasn't exactly heartening, in the first place.

And so, there Celadon was, minding her own business, when a wall-crawling horror dropped down from the air vent in front of her.

Celadon froze. Years of training as Muscovite had honed her instincts into sharp and deadly instruments, and she wasn't about to be taken off-guard by something so banal as a monstrosity.

Celadon drew the phaser which she'd taken off an android, set it to 'stun,' and aimed it at the creature.

Then, she thought better of it.

"Computer," she said. "Activate all emergency force fields within a twenty-foot radius."

The shimmer of fields activating went up around her. To her indescribable relief, one sprang up between Celadon and the creature, just as it lunged towards her, drawn to the sound of her voice.

"Celadon to anyone," she tried again. "Is there anyone conscious? Particularly the doctor? Please? I believe one of your eggs has hatched prematurely. I would appreciate backup."

There was no response.

"Computer," she said, after a few more questions, "Deactivate all force fields except for bulkheads 3J and 4J."
All force fields save the two imprisoning the creature powered down.

Celadon backed up a good fifteen feet.

"Computer," she said. "Activate force field 2J."

It did, and she tested it, to be sure it was up.

"Computer, deactivate field. 3J."

It did so, and the life form scuttled across, the floor, making a rush for her.

"Reactivate 3J," she said, trapping it.

"Deactivate 4J," she said. When she was certain that the creature was contained.

In this manner, Celadon managed to corral the creature to the infirmary—which was terrible—as she had to lure it through the jeffries tubes to reach the next floor, and the medical bay.

She left it several meters away, going in first for reconnaissance, unsure whether she'd find a whole other horde of the things in the sick bay.

Celadon opened the door, and did a quick scan of the inside.

She didn't see anything moving.

She sighed in relief and started to take a closer look.

"Doctor?" she said. "Computer, activate the Emergency Medical Hologram."

Nothing happened.

"Computer, is it possible to place the hatchling into stasis?" she asked.

"Negative," replied the computer. "The Romulan intermediate stage is not stable enough to withstand stasis."

"Is there any way to send a distress signal?" she queried.

"Negative," replied the computer. "Communications Systems are damaged beyond repair."

Celadon sighed. "How long can an intermediate survive after hatching?"

"Romulan intermediates typically survive for a period of five to seven days," the computer informed her. "Lack of a digestive system makes longer survival impossible."

"And how long has it been since this intermediate hatched?" she asked.

"Three days and nine hours," replied the computer.

"Are there any suitable hosts listed on the ship's roster?" asked Celadon.

"Negative," said the computer.

Celadon sighed again. "Wonderful."

And with that, she split apart. Sai and Ash were sent flying in opposite directions.
"Absolutely not!" screeched Sai, levering herself up to glare at Ash.

"We're on what appears to be a Romulan ship," said Ash, returning with a thousand-yard stare of her own. "And, while Romulans have never been my favorite species, they are undeniably sentient."

"Ash, these things are basically spider-wasps," Sai pointed out, with the air of one trying to talk a friend out of a bad business deal.

"I know," Ash replied, her voice dull and heavy.

Sai frowned. "Have you considered that your status as a martyr archetype might predispose you towards self-sacrifice?"

Ash snorted. "Have you considered that your status as a villain archetype might predispose you towards ruthlessness?"

"Point," said Sai. After a moment, she slumped. "You're really going to go through with this?"

"When I was in your universe, you knew exactly what to do, and I listened to you. This may not be my world, but it's one I'm sort of familiar with. How can I refuse the opportunity to be an idealist, when it was a world like this one that taught me what idealism even was in the first place?"

For a long moment, Sai closed her eyes.

"If you're sure," Sai said, eventually.

Ash laughed. "I'm already dead, so what else can I lose? Besides, it'll give me more positive karma. At this point, I'm practically a collector."

Sai sighed. She pushed a few buttons, experimentally, eventually hitting on the right combination to turn on a biobed. "Whenever you're ready."

Ash dropped the force field instead, and left the sickbay

Then, not ten seconds later, there was a thud as her body hit the doors from the outside.
Chapter 8

One Month Later:

Excerpt from Steven Universe and the Game of Glitter, Chapter Fifty-Eight:

"It's for the best, Steven," said Garnet.

"For the best?" said the Gem Human Hybrid, incredulous. "Amethyst betrayed us! Pearl is DEAD! Why would you let this happen?!"

"I can see the future, Steven. That doesn't always mean I can change it."

"What do you mean?"

"This was the only future in which we defeated the Diamonds. The only way we could save the Earth."

"The only—but Muscovite killed hundreds of people! Including everyone in Beach City. Including Dad!"

"There are seven billion people on Earth, Steven. We saved as many as we could, but it was impossible to save them all, just like with the humans stuck in Pink Diamond's zoo. We needed to wait for Muscovite to exhaust herself before we could defeat her. Unfortunately, this was the only way."

"Shut up!" Steven picked up Rose's sword and lunged at Garnet.

Her physical form disrupted by the sword running through her chest, Garnet destabilized, and Ruby and Sapphire's gems fell to the beach.

Steven bubbled them and sent them to the temple. Maybe someday he would forgive them. But, for now, Sapphire could no longer be trusted. And neither could Ruby. And defiantly not Garnet.

Steven walked into the kitchen, seeing a note on the fridge in Garnet's handwriting.

He almost crumpled the paper and walked away, but something compelled him to unfold the note and read it.

'Look behind you.'

…and he turned just in time to see Muscovite pulling a grenade from her cheek, about to slam it into his head. He barely dodged in time, putting up an airtight bubble to keep out her viruses.

"You? But you were shattered!"

"Yes," agreed the Gem, with an unhinged smile, "I was. Did you think that enough to stop a Muscovite? You could turn me to glitter and it wouldn't do much more than slow me down. I am a cultivar, little hybrid. We are sent to hostile worlds without help or backup. If we're not nigh-on indestructible, we don't survive our first mission. This is my fourth."

Steven looked, and he knew that she wasn't bluffing. Here was an enemy. Of himself, of the Gems, of
the Earth, who couldn't be persuaded. Couldn't be bubbled, couldn't even be shattered. And, if he
didn't stop her here and now, she would kill the earth.

There was only one way to end this.

Steven leapt forward, tackled Muscovite, and bubbled her. He pushed her onto the Warp Pad.
Warped out to Bismuth's forge, wrestled her into the trenches and stabbed, breaking the largest
fragment he could find into two smaller halves. While Muscovite was writhing around in pain, he re-
bubbled her, stepped back, and activated the lavastream. When the bubble had disappeared beneath
the molten rock, Steven popped it.

Maybe there should have been a scream, or a hiss, or some small shriek of horror. Instead, there
was only the vicious sound of lava draining through the floor, and down to the earth from whence it
came.

After a minute, the flow turned off, leaving only a clean, bare floor in its wake, and Steven fell to his
knees, the stress of the day finally catching up to him.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed there. Perhaps a minute, perhaps an hour. But, eventually he
stood.

Steven warped back to Beach City, stopped by the cherry tree where they'd buried Pearl's shattered
fragments, then walked to the empty big donut. In the storage room, he found a single, solitary donut
with purple frosting. It was starting to grow mold and would undoubtedly give him food poisoning if
he ate it now.

He ate it anyway, and thought of Amethyst. He wondered if she was doing well under White
Diamond. If she was happy. If she ever missed him.

He shook his head and headed back to the temple.

Time to go free Garnet. She wasn't the first person that Steven would have chosen to talk with, but
she was the only one left.

Sometimes, that was the best you could do.

It wasn't a perfect ending, but then again, endings rarely were.

Steven went into the temple.

When Sai appeared out of thin air the middle of the night, she had been expecting to drop off the
flash-drive and then leave.

She was not expecting to appear in Greg Universe's Car Wash, to see said human and the Gems
huddled around a laptop.

Nor for all of them, save Garnet, to start screaming as they noticed her presence.

"Sorry," said Sai, after the yelling had petered off into shocked silence. "If this is a bad time, I can
come back."

"It's okay, Ash," said Greg. "Just kind of… caught us off guard."

"… I'm Sai, actually."
"W-what?" said Pearl.

Sai sketched out a bow, crossed her arms into the Diamond Salute, and flashed them a cold grin. "Cultivar Muscovite, at your service," she said. "How fare the famed Crystal Gems?"

"W-what did you do to Ash?" asked Steven.

"I fused with her," Muscovite answered, cool and detached.

"But—but she's human…"

"Not in my body, she wasn't. I had her modify the human body I that was inhabiting enough to allow Fusion. When Celadon separated again, we were back in our old bodies."

Steven frowned. "You were… fixing yourselves?"

"Of course." She saw their tense expressions and softened, slightly. "I wouldn't hurt her," she assured, "Doing so would essentially be hurting myself."

"What do you mean?" asked Amethyst.

"Your… reactions," she said. "I assume you've read Game of Glitter?"

"Just finished it, actually," said Pearl.

"Ah," said Sai. "That would explain a few things. Well, to start with, the Muscovite from Game of Glitter is not me. Not in the strictest sense, anyway. Did Ash tell you about Four Stories Short?"

"It doesn't exist," said Garnet, "Because, in this timeline, you never met the author."

"Right," said Sai. "I didn't want to tell her… because, as you've probably guessed… Ash's character was based off of me. Off of the impression that I, as Muscovite, made on Fletcher the webcomic artist." She coughed. "I… didn't want to make things weird between us, so I gave Ash the pirated copies of Four Stories Short that I'd saved for the hilarious translator's comments, and kept the damning evidence to myself. And… in doing so, I deprived myself of information that was just as valuable, only neither of us knew to look for it.

"I am not canon. I'd suspected it for some time, and have just recently had that theory confirmed." Sai tossed a flash drive their way. Garnet caught it. "Since I exist in your universe that means it is possible that you are not strictly canon either, so I'm not sure how much good this will do you…" she shook her head. "But, in any case, I hadn't thought much about the origins of my own so-called 'character.'" She paused. "As it turns out, the author of my fanfic probably based me off of Clara Hart, her old babysitter.

"In other words, Muscovite was inspired by Clara Hart. Clara Hart was inspired by Muscovite. I… myself, Saino Moore, am a character inspired by Ash Hughes. I, personally, am derivative. Unoriginal. Copied."

She blinked, realizing that she was repeating herself, but ultimately deciding that, to hell with it, she still wasn't done yet. "Each of us is based on the other. Two hands drawing one another. Snakes eating each other's tails. Paradox clones."

"But, the story…" said Steven.

"The timelines have been reset," Sai informed him. "Things are different this go-around. 
In this timeline, Muscovite never met Sam Fletcher, and Four Stories Short was never written. In this timeline, Clara Hart skipped high school and went to college on a scholarship. She never needed money from babysitting. Thus, Anita Darkle wrote Game of Glitter freshman year of college rather than final year of middle school, and based my character off of her impression of me as a final year grad student working on her second PhD, rather than a benevolent babysitter. In this timeline, Muscovite, as a character, still exists, but with the heartless parts of my personality amplified—likely because of my not-so-subtle identity crisis while watching the series, and my Occam's Razor attitude towards fantasy."

"But, Game of Glitter. It wasn't anything like how the rest of us are, either," said Steven. "Why did she do that?"

Sai sighed. "There are many benefits to being a fanfic author," she began, "one of which is the privilege to write wildly out of character. And the comfort that comes from never existing in a vacuum. I can't know for sure, but… I'm pretty sure I see where at least some of these changes came from."

"Really," said Amethyst, flatly.

She turned to Amethyst. "There was a leaked list of episode synopses released during… I think it was season two? One of those titles was 'Steven Vs. Amethyst.' People speculated, based on that, that you would betray the Crystal Gems. And the author was most likely writing her own theories into her fic."

She turned to Pearl. "This was written before most of your backstory was revealed, so sympathy for you wasn't running at its highest. The majority of the fandom shipped Greg/Rose at the time… therefore you were an obstacle standing in the way of their One True Pairing. Characters like that are often killed off out of spite. Or it could be a simple case of Ron the Death Eater."

"Ron the what?" asked Pearl, puzzled.

Sai shrugged. "For whatever reason, some characters get unfair treatment. In the early days of the fandom, that included you. Peridot got the opposite, with Draco in Leather Pants. People gave her a lot of sympathy and leeway without a lot of evidence, and they were unnecessarily harsh on you. That kind of thing… doesn't always make sense, but it is undeniable that it happens."

Finally, she turned to Garnet. "You, I think, were written as an expy of Dr. Manhattan. Characters who can see the future tend to get typecast into one of several roles. There's the blind seer, the Cassandra, the prophet… Dr. Manhattan is a character from Watchmen… arguably the dark and gritty superhero story. In fact…" She drew a tablet from her gem, turned it on, and searched through it for a minute. "Here we go," she said, handing the tablet over. "Keep it, if you like" she offered. "But, fair warning, some of the stuff on there is pretty grim."

She cleared her throat before continuing. "Anyway, Dr. Manhattan gained the ability to see the future perfectly… meaning that he could never change anything, even should he wish to. He was something of a temporal singularity. To him, all times were more or less one. It's a powerful image… even if it's not how your own future vision works… it's more comprehensible. Rather than trying to pick the best future out of a myriad of possibilities… it's much easier to write soothsayers as all-knowing jerks who won't change the timeline for their own reasons. Near as I can tell, that's how Game of Glitter writes you."

"And me?" asked Steven.

"Rule forty-three of the internet," said Sai, with a shrug. "The more innocent a character is, the more
satisfying it is to corrupt them."

"Oh."

"So, I mean, most of the changes probably weren't done out of hatred. It's just that... fanfiction isn't written purely to tell a good story, or an original story... or even a canon-consistent story... In the best of cases, fanfiction is written solely because the author was having fun. So, it doesn't have to accurately reflect any character from the source-material. In fact, if it perfectly reflected canon, there would be little reason to read it. If it offers nothing new, either content-wise or lens-wise... then you might as well be re-watching the original show. And where's the fun in going to extra effort to perfectly recreate something that already exists?"

"Huh," said Pearl, thoughtfully.

"But I'm going on and on again, aren't I? Ash and I have all the time in the world to talk each others' ears off... but other people usually like to get a word in edgewise, so sorry for dominating the conversation."

"You and Ash," Garnet repeated. "You're still working together, then. What are you two doing now?" she asked.

"We found our way to another universe," said Sai. "Still Science Fiction, but considerably more... bleak. Ash did something noble, and should probably be hospitalized from the fallout, but about the most I've been able to do is convince her to take it easy. She asked me to come here and visit in her stead."

"As nice as it's been talking to you... if either of you return, you'll definitely be caught," said Garnet.

Sai nodded. "We suspected as much... but I'm glad I got to meet you. You have no idea how hard it's been to keep up professional appearances."

"Why?" asked Steven.

"Imagine that you were dog-copter and you had the opportunity to meet your author," said Sai, "That's how I feel about meeting all of you. My own author based me partly on her own experiences, and tastes in fiction, yes... but a good part of who I am was inspired by you. That's enough to get anyone excited."

"Really?"

Sai turned away.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE..." Sai squealed, wheeling back around, clasping her hands together in glee. "I can believe I'm meeting the Crystal Gems and Greg Universe! I am SUCH a huge fan. I... I need a minute."

She turned away, as though to compose herself.

When she turned back, she was utterly blank. "I figured that more will probably get done if I remain somewhat objective about all of this."

"Did," Amethyst looked disturbed, "...did you just turn off your emotions like a switch?"

"I did serve the Diamonds for nearly two millennia. I understand the importance of professionalism. But, if I do seem somewhat cold, know that it is not for lack of affection, merely... lack of affection.
Anything else you'd like to know?"

"The longer you stay, the more danger you're in. Anything else we need, we should be able to figure out for ourselves," said Pearl.

"Then I bid you farewell," she said giving a final bow.

Sai vanished.

"What's on the drive?" asked Amethyst, once Muscovite had gone.

All eyes turned to their resident fortune-teller.

"Nine Seasons of Steven Universe," Garnet answered.

Steven and Amethyst exchanged wide excited grins. "Marathon!"
Chapter 9

Once back within their chambers, Sai killed an hour or two reading Harry Potter reincarnation fics while she waited for Ash. When the human finally showed up, they immediately fused into Celadon and dropped into sleep, sending them back to the Star Trek Universe.

When they reappeared, it wasn't near the officers' lounge, where they'd last gone to sleep. Instead, they were in the rec room. Waiting for them were four Xenomorphs. Or—as this universe would have it—four Romulans. It had been about a month since they'd found this universe, but neither Ash nor Sai were truly used to it yet.

"I'm back," announced Celadon with a wave. "Anything happen while I was gone?"

Celadon, weirdly, had experienced no culture shock whatsoever.

9XO nodded. (Muscovite was Facet 9 cut 6XO, the last of her cut. She'd given the four Romulans who had grown under her watch nicknames in succession with her own designation: 7XO, 8XO, 9XO, and 10XO).

The Romulans stood from their various postures of relaxation and moved to stand together, as 9XO announced, "We chose names for ourselves."

Celadon's face lit up. "That's great! What are they?"

9XO placed a hand on her chest. "I'm Diaspore."

8XO folded her arms. "Athena."

10XO raised a hand, returning Celadon's friendly wave. "Dionysus," was his announcement.

7XO cleared her throat with a growl. "Mesolite," she stated.

They looked to Celadon, gauging her reaction to this turn of events.

Celadon split apart.

Ash tried to stand too quickly and had a dizzy spell. Her vision blacked out, and, for a moment, it was as though she stood on an invisible floor, the only solid thing a pair of laptops resting upon invisible beds, bounded on all sides by invisible walls.

Then, the vision passed, and she was back on the ship.

Ash finished standing, and waved aside Sai's concerned inquiries, turning to face the Romulans once more.

"You heard us, then," she said.

"No," said Athena. "Actually, we found the security logs of the ship."

Ash tensed. "There were security logs?"
"Were," Diaspore agreed. "We encrypted them."

"Good," said Ash, relaxing. "While we don't regret what we did, we also don't want to have to do it again, so the less evidence around the better."

"Speaking of," said Sai. "Are you sure you don't want Romulan names?"

"We have aliases, should we need them. But we have already decided that these are our names," said Dionysus.

Sai shrugged. "Your choice, I guess. New Universe, might as well have new Romulans."

"What were the Romulans like in your universe?" asked Athena

Ash and Sai exchanged a look. "Fictional," they both said.

"The overall setting here was part of an optimistic work of science fiction," elaborated Sai.

"...but your particular species was from a pessimistic one," finished Ash.

"We got here via fusion," said Sai, "so I can only assume that the 'fusion' of various ideologies in our destination is tied to the fusion of Ash's optimism and my own pessimism within Celadon, the one who found this place."

Diaspore bared her teeth. "Speaking of, how was your mysterious expedition?"

Sai chuckled. "Better than expected. Wanna watch me force Ash to watch a cartoon?"

Mesolite lashed her tail back and forth. "Why would we do that?"

Sai shrugged. "What else is there to do?"

"What?" said Ash. "Sai, you're still on about that?"

"Just watch one episode," she wheedled. "If you don't like it, you can stop."

"I've already seen the pilot," Ash pointed out.

"I didn't say it was the first episode, did I?" said Sai, seeming offended by Ash's lack of faith. "I want to show you an episode near the end of Season One: The Return."

"...Okay, fine," said Ash, deciding that Sai would probably win eventually, and that she might as well get this over with.

After some fiddling around with formats, Sai got the episode downloaded to the bridge viewscreen. Ash sat at the con and was controlling things. Diaspore, Mesolite, and Athena were lounging in the captain's chair and the two chairs beside it. Dionysus sprawled himself across the upper console, not bothering to use a chair at all.

"Got it!" said Sai, as the theme song began to play. She then turned to watch Ash instead of the screen.

Ash noticed and rolled her eyes. She then turned to watch the screen herself and settled down, all set to criticize and complain... and then fell silent as her expectations were shattered.
This episode… appeared to involve spaceships? Despite what Ash had previously said about keeping her guard up, she hadn't expected for science fiction to, in any way, actually impact the story. Still, best not to get her hopes up. Probably, one of their quirky relatives was coming to visit and the Crystal Gems would have to pass them off as a normal human…

But no, everyone seemed very worried. Apparently, Lapis Lazuli had warned them that they'd be 'coming back' with more gems and advanced weaponry? What was going on?

The civilians were all evacuating, even Steven. What? Wasn't he the leader? The one they practically threw into any dangerous situation whatsoever?

And was that… genuine emotional connection between them? Steven had inherited his position as leader from his mother? Sure, she'd heard that from Sai, but she hadn't thought about it in an emotional context, merely as an excuse.

When Amethyst and Pearl unfused, it's was truly a shock, to see that fusion had been included in-show. She hadn't thought in a million years that Fusion would have gotten past the censors.

And Steven had come back in on a giant pink lion. How long had he had that? Why was there so much continuity here, when she'd never seen so much as a hint of it before?

Green Diamond was one of the antagonists. Apparently, they'd been 'breaking her machines'?

'Huh, they actually brought back Lapis Lazuli. Whose side was she on? Heel-face revolving door, maybe?'

'This is not a gem-controlled planet?'

Holy crap, Sai was right!

They cared about each other. Deeply. How had she never picked up on this?

"I'm a Crystal Gem, too!" shouted Steven Universe, onscreen, and all Ash could do was stare.

"So," said Sai, after the credits had started rolling, "what did you think?" Behind them, the Romulans snickered and hissed in amusement.

Ash turned to face Sai like a mannequin bolted to a merry go round, her eyes wild and unsettled. She pulled Sai down by the shoulders, then drew her close as though imparting a secret.

"I," began Ash.

"Was."

End of Part One.

Chapter End Notes

Not sure when/how this fic might update again, but it's been almost a year since I posted
longfic so I figured I'd share this.

Fun Fact: If you read between the lines of Part one, you can find the story of how I got into the Steven Universe Fandom.

In honor of the fandom that gave Mary Sue her name, Part two will mostly be Star Trek (As you can probably tell by the timeskip, which I'll need to flashback to later, to fully explain things. Though, I'm certain some of you can probably guess what happened during the missing month). This part will probably include at least one more timeskip.

Part three will mostly be Undertale, though that's less well defined at this point. Probably won't fill in timeskips until part three.

Part four is still very loosely outlined.

So yeah, we'll see how things go, update wise. If it's any consolation, I don't usually take longer than three years to finish a fic, and I haven't abandoned one yet.

If you have any ideas about what you'd like to see happen, feel free to leave a comment/review. Can't promise to include anything, but I'll consider all suggestions.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Part 2

A Heart Full of LOVE

The next two weeks were spent bingeing the entirety of Steven Universe, with the episode order being decided by Ash, to whom Sai had given a list of episode synopses. The order that Ash felt best had been something like: "The Return," "Jailbreak," "Political Power," "The Message," "Giant Woman," "Future Vision," "Marble Madness," "Warp Tour," "Rose's Scabbard"… in other words, the watch order was driven primarily by Ash's refusal to watch things in chronological order, and her desire to gain context for Jailbreak. She hadn't even admitted that she was going to finish the show until they were halfway through the second season.

It was the third season before she bothered watching things chronologically. Even so, she'd already watched the last episode of seasons three through nine, just to assure herself that the show wasn't headed for a downer ending, and then contrasted the final episode with the show's pilot just to check the quality of bookends.

"Sai."

"Ash."

"Your character was inspired by Bloodstone."

"Most likely."

"By Ronaldo Fryman."

"Ronaldo's my favorite character for a reason, Ash."

By the fifth season, she was well and truly hooked.

Sai just sat there, more than happy to fangirl with Ash. The Romulans watched mostly in silence, though they did stay and watch, rather than leaving to pursue their own interests.

When they'd gotten through the ninth season, Ash spent nearly a day afterwards in dumbfounded amazement.

"Sai," she said, eventually.

"Yeah, Ash?"

"I was insufferably rude to all of them," she said, her eyes unfocused in mortified flashback. "And
I'm never going to get to apologize."

Sai patted Ash's arm. "I'm sure they'll forgive you."

"Yes," said Ash. "Of course they will. Doesn't mean I feel any better about it."

They watched other shows after that, including a few of the sillier episodes of Star Trek TOS from Ash's home universe, but none had the emotional impact of Steven Universe.

Though, they did offer their own amusements.

"Ash."

"Yes, Sai?"

"You didn't tell me that the Vulcans were space-elves."

Ash blinked.

"You didn't tell me that you were a space racist."

It was through this digital marathon, however, that they started to really get to know the four Romulans.

How Dionysus loved dramas and mysteries, and enjoyed talking over the characters when he spotted plot holes.

How Diaspore loved anything that was an adaptation or infotainment, and who seemed to enjoy nothing so much as a good documentary.

How Athena's favorites were usually comedies, and not necessarily highbrow ones at that. She was the best at replacing dialogue or theme songs with parodies or jokes.

How Mesolite's enjoyment of things was usually directly proportional to the number of explosions they contained. She was the best of them at video games.

They'd been able to rest, to take a load off. To get to know the kids and such. They even got bored enough to start going through Sai's collection of abridged series.

Many words could be used to describe that experience, but the most accurate was probably, 'meta.'

Though that's not to say that the whole thing was all sunshine and rainbows, either.

"Sai, Four Stories Short got a movie in this universe."

"Watch it?"

"Watch it."

Two hours later:
"That was the worst movie I've ever seen," said Sai, aghast.

"Including Alien Three?" asked Ash.

Sai shook her head. "Ash, I've never seen any of the Alien movies."

Ash was taken aback. "Not even the first two?"

"No. Why did you see them?" asked Sai, perplexed. "They seem a little… dark for you. You're usually into camp, right?"

"The Alien Franchise is totally camp!" Ash protested.

"…how?"

Ash tried to wrap a hand around Sai's shoulders, discovered she didn't have the reach, and slapped her on the back instead, before going the console and waving expansively. "To answer that question, we first have to watch a film by the title of 'Dark Star.'"

Two hours later:

"Okay," said Sai, "so what did that have to do with anything?"

"Dark Star was a low budget film," answered Ash, "one which some of its creators were never entirely happy with, regardless of its cult status. You know Pinback?"

"Yeah."

"He's played by Dan O'Bannon, who later got to go on to make a high-budget sci-fi thriller."

"Alien?" asked Sai.

"Yeah," agreed Ash. "He wanted to make a film with a realistic extraterrestrial, to make up for the beach ball with polka dots and duck feet."

"…and he made up for it with the Alien Franchise?"

Ash nodded. "More or less. If you watch the first one, you can see all kinds of parallels. Here, I'll start it."

"We've already seen the security footage," said Athena. "I doubt it'll be any worse than what we've already witnessed."

Sai shrugged. "If they're okay with it, I'm fine, too."

Two Hours Later:


"We're not done yet!" said Ash, as she started Aliens.
Two Hours Later:

"Wow," said Sai, blinking. "On to the next one?"

Ash frowned. "No, the third movie never happened."

"What?" said Sai, caught off guard.

Ash's frown deepened into a scowl. "I refuse to acknowledge that the third movie happened. We can watch the last two later, if you want… but they don't deserve to stand by the first two. Wanna watch some Star Trek instead?"

Sai fumbled at the abrupt change in gears. "I'd actually prefer something a bit more… serious."

Ash took offense. "Star Trek is totally serious!"

"…How?" wondered Sai, although she sounded considerably more resigned than the previous time she'd asked the same question.

Ash brought her hands together to stop them from flailing. "Gene Roddenberry wanted to write a show that tackled social and political issues of the day, but didn't think he'd be able to get it past the censors… so he disguised it as a show about space cowboys."

Sai frowned. "But it had Sexism. And Sixties Hair. And Shatner."

"And meaning," said Ash, typing into the console. "Here: 'Let That Be Your Last Battlefield.' Let's watch this one."

Forty minutes later:

"This was about racism on earth, wasn't it?" asked Sai.

"'The Measure of a Man,'" said Ash, grinning. "Let's go!"

Thus, they proceeded to watch Star Trek for the next week.

But, of course, things eventually swung right back around to serious again.

"Ash?"

"Sai?"

"I was going to watch the third and fourth Alien movies when you weren't around, because it seemed to bother you… but I forgot that I was searching the ship's database and not your files."

Ash thought it over for a minute before it finally hit her. "There's a counterpart movie for Alien in this universe?"

"There is," said Sai. "Also, on a completely unrelated note, the humans in this universe are not part of the Federation."

Realization dawned on Ash's face. "No…"
"Yes."

"What is it?" asked Diaspore, coming to see what all the ruckus was about.

"Humans in this universe are xenophobes…" said Sai, "and that's putting it lightly."

Two hours later:

"Thematically, it's the same as Alien," observed Sai, while Ash sat, ashen-faced, beside her. "It's even called 'Alien.' But the protagonists are non-humanoid members of the Federation, and the unknown monsters… are homo sapiens…"

"Is.. is this what humans are like in your universe?" asked Dionysus.

"Not… exactly," said Ash, hesitant, "but at the same time, I can't say that I'm surprised."

And, of course:

"Sai."

"Ash."

"You based your physical form on Voldemort from A Very Potter Musical?"

"Well, not completely," said Sai, with a grin, "but that was where I got the idea to combine bare chest with sparkly cape…" she admitted.

"What about your eyes?" asked Ash.

"Utility," said Sai. "They allow me to encrypt ciphers which cannot be cracked with the naked eye, gem or human."

"The camouflage?" said Ash.

"Based on a meme, and also Walt Whitman," said Sai. "'Do you want to be seen or not?' / Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am vast. I contain multitudes."

"What did you look like on Homeworld?" Ash wondered.

Sai shapeshifted, and suddenly, it was like another Gem was there altogether. She had no cape, and therefore much more cloth to work with. She had a shirt. And shoes. And hair. Her clothes were a brown uniform with white accents, and a white diamond insignia on her chest. Her skin was green. Her hair as well, styled into a short bob. Her eyes were black. Solid black, and were smooth and flat as window glass.

Then, she blinked, and Sai was back to her normal appearance.

"In a word?" said Sai, "Boring."

They'd been stranded for about six months, when the kids finally reached puberty.

According to Sai's readings of the medical scanners in sickbay, Diaspore was a Queen, and not
merely tall for her age, as they'd all thought. In a few more weeks, she'd be able to reach out telepathically to other hives for help. Of course, that wasn't an action entirely without risk, either.

"We should probably make ourselves scarce," said Ash, "I doubt the Romulan Empire would react well to our presence."

"If you can do it safely, it might be wise to disappear for awhile," Diaspore agreed, "but… could you come back in six months? We'd like to see you both again, once we're settled."

"Well, no promises if we're captured," said Sai, "but we'll do our best."

"We can go hang out in the creepy computer room," Ash agreed. "If we're still free in six months, we'll come visit."

With that, they said their goodbyes and went to sleep.

When Clara Hart went to sleep in the Egyptian Dorms of the Afterlife, she always went to her own Earth. When Cultivar Muscovite slept there, she always went to her own Earth, in Steven's Universe.

When Celadon went to sleep in the Dorms, she always went to the ship with the four Romulans, in the Star Trek/Alien fusion 'verse.

In the Trek 'verse, Ash and Sai had been spending at least eight hours a day fused as Celadon, so that Ash wouldn't need to sleep.

This was not because they were afraid of going back to the dorms (though of course they were afraid), it was instead because the dorms were no longer where they went when they slept, and the place that they did go to was rather… disconcerting.

In terms of dimensions, it was exactly like the dorm room they'd shared: a one bedroom apartment with two beds in the main living space. Same furniture. Same furniture placement. Everything that was in their old room was there, save for fact that there was no door.

Also, the fact that all of it was invisible.

When touched, the beds, the chairs, the walls and floors, were all still there, but all that could be seen was the unforgiving black void of space.

Upon each of their beds, there rested a completely ordinary (so far as they could tell) laptop computer.

It was an incredibly obvious trap.

And the two of them currently had no intention of being caught.

Their working plan was to spend the six months fused as Celadon and meditating. On the floor, because like hell were they touching the mysterious-computers-of-(quite-possibly)-death. This was the first time Sai had been in this particular room, and something about it pinged something within her memories. She figured she'd talk to Ash about it when they were Celadon, be a nice conversation to get the ball rolling. Wasn't like there was anything else to do, and the current plan seemed solidly decent to Sai.

There was one little problem with it, however. And that was this:

When they regained consciousness in the invisible room, there was already someone there.
"Hi, there!" said a mysterious figure to a very surprised Ash and Sai. "Do you have a minute to talk about our Lord and Savior, Dagon?"

"Oh, shit, shit, shit, shit—Ash, get over here!"

Ash obligingly went over. Sai attempted to fuse into Celadon, but the contrast of Sai's terror with Ash's complete bewilderment created too much dissonance, and she instead settled for grabbing Ash's shoulders and shaking her back and forth in distress.

"Ash, that's Bill Cipher! Haven't you ever seen Gravity Falls!?"

Ash blinked. "Sai, that's an isosceles triangle," she said. "Haven't you ever read Flatland?"

"What?" said Sai, only slightly distracted from her panic. "I've seen the Futurama version. I think I get the gist!"

Ash gingerly disentangled herself from the overly enthusiastic Gem. "No, I don't think you do. Because Flatland, the original book… was primarily a social commentary."

She leveled an assessing glance at 'Bill Cipher.' "Are you… all right?" she asked, not sure what level of concern would be appropriate in this situation.

Bill Cipher cackled. "Haven't been in eons, kid, but thanks for asking!"

"Why are you asking after his wellbeing?" said Sai. "We're the ones in danger!"

"Is Flatland by Edwin A. Abbott canon for you?" said Ash, to Bill Cipher, "and, if so, may I discuss it?"

"Ha!" said Bill, "Your Universe's version more or less aligns with mine. Talk away! By the way, you mind if I borrow a copy?"

"Sai, do you mind?"

"How would he know that we have a copy?" asked Sai, suspiciously.

Ash shrugged. "Possibly because he can see the things stored inside your Gem. Possibly because he can read our minds. Either/Or."

Sai startled and put a hand on her cheek, as though to shield it from view. She looked back and forth between Ash and Cipher, as though unsure whether this was all some sort of ridiculous joke.

"Not gonna end well, but fine, here you go," said Sai, eventually. She handed over one of Ash's thumb drives.

Ash in turn gave the drive to Cipher, who ate it, crunching down on the plastic and metal.

Sai shuddered at the sound, but Ash remained more or less unaffected.

"Flatland," said Ash, to Sai, "is a two dimensional world with a rigid social hierarchy. Color is banned as being something which might promote freedom of expression and egalitarianism. In this society, Circles are at the top, and Triangles at the bottom. Triangles are considered unintelligent,
overabundant, and significantly worthless to the point where it's acceptable to strap them to the walls so that young polygons can learn about various angles in a school setting. Depending on the school, they might merely be held for their entire lives. Or, they may be left to starve to death, with new ones being brought in to replace the dead."

"In Flatland?" said Sai, incredulous.

Ash shrugged. "Two dimensions or three, people are still people."

"Suffering doesn't automatically make someone a good person, Ash," Sai pointed out, stepping forward, so that she was, once again, between Ash and the source of danger.

"No, it doesn't," Ash agreed, "But, it's not the fact that he's suffered so much as the fact that he's here. He's gone beyond everything he was ever taught was possible, and came out whole, if— by the impression I'm getting from you—only arguably sane. It's just, in general, expanding your own horizons tends to turn people into better people. Unless you're going with a Lovecraftian view of the universe, in which case, carry on as you were."

"How did you get here?" Sai asked Bill Cipher, ignoring Ash's last remark.

"Same way you did, Glitterdust!" said Bill. "Want to learn how it works?"

Sai's eyes narrowed. "In exchange for what?"

Bill gestured towards the two laptops. "Spring that trap, and I'll open mine."

Ash once again stepped past Sai, despite the latter's hissed warnings, and examined the laptops. "Are these yours?"

"Nope!" was Bill's cheerful reply. "But I know who made 'em."

"Ash, get back here! He's a Faustian demon who wants to destroy all life as we know it!"

"And you're a killing machine who specializes in extinction. What's your point?"

"You're a martyr! Don't you think it might be better to consult an information source that isn't morally bankrupt?"

Ash cocked her head. "Sai, just last week you were bored enough suggest that we see what was on the laptops, regardless of consequences. If the price he wants is something we were going to do anyway, then the information is free."

"If he wants us to do it, then there must be something wrong with it!"

"It's a big multiverse out there. We're certainly not canon. What makes you think he is?"

Sai froze. "Fanon Bill Cipher is a sadistic nightmare-fetishist that everyone wants to fuck, and who usually gets shipped with a twelve year old! He wouldn't be any better!"

Ash sighed. "We're not getting anywhere. Celadon as tie-breaker?"

Sai shuddered. "Don't need to ask me twice." She held out a hand.

Ash took it.

Celadon formed in a shower of sparkling dust motes.
She hummed in thought.

"Your terms are a full and complete explanation for how we jump universes in exchange for our examining the contents of the two laptops?" she asked the demon.

"My terms are as much of an explanation of jumping universes as your three-dimensional brains can handle… in exchange for your two halves playing the game on each of those computers," was Bill Cipher's reply.

Celadon tapped her chin. "Well, on the one hand, I certainly don't need to do this. On the other, that might be exactly why I should do it now. Supply and demand and all that. There is no particular demand for the information, so the price is more reasonable now than it would be if I were, say, being hauled in chains before the Egyptian pantheon to face my doom."

She began to pace. "In addition, if I were to find someone best suited to ask for an explanation… it would obviously be you. You started out in Flatland, and not only did you survive the higher dimensions in the Nightmare Realm… by all accounts you conquered them. And, quite frankly, I'd be shocked if whatever I'm experiencing involves fewer than four spatial dimensions.

"The cincher though… you are being straightforward. That's not in character, so there's a possibility you're not canon. Should you be extracanonical, as I am, there's a chance that your background will leave you sympathetic towards underdogs, such as Ash. Even if you are canon, your ruthlessness and tendency towards chaotic evil might leave you with a soft spot for Sai. I am their amalgamation, so there is likely something about me that you respect, whichever half of me it comes from being somewhat irrelevant."

Bill extended a flaming hand. "So, we have a deal?"

Celadon stepped forward and shook it. "Deal," she agreed.

The flames died down and Celadon stepped back. "So, how are we going to do this?"

"In half an A press," was Bill's cheerful reply.

"Oh, sweet merciful stars," whispered Celadon, eyes widening in horror as she lost cohesion and broke in half.
Two days later:

In a box were twenty-three cassette tapes.

In a Padd were several weeks worth of security footage.

When next Celadon formed, she held a single laptop in her hands, which her components’ memories informed her had once been two laptops.

Huh. Looked like Ash and Sai were dumping consequences on her again. Which, honestly, Celadon was fine with. Dealing with consequences meant that she existed, after all, and she’d never turn down a chance to exist.

Turning on the laptop confirmed that, yes, the machine did have a word processing program. And, according to the clock in the monitor’s corner, she still had more than five months to kill before going back to visit the Rock/God Romulans.

However, she hadn’t gotten around to typing out much more than an outline, when the power cut off from the computer, leaving her in complete and total darkness.

When the light returned, Celadon found herself in a long column-lined hallway with a checkerboard-tiled floor, facing a skeleton with glowing blue eyes, who stood at the head of a crowd of monsters, all of which were pleasantly familiar to Ash and horribly familiar to Sai.

This was the Judgment Hall, her memories informed her, and she was facing Sans.

"So," said Sans, "I’ve got a question for ya. Do you think even the worst person can change…? that everyone can be a good person, if they just try?"

Celadon hummed. "'Worst' by whose standards?"

"By the standards of decency. You’ve had your fun, played your game. And now… now you will be judged. You will be judged for your every action. You will be judged for every EXP you’ve earned. And for all the LOVE in your heart."

"And you…"

Celadon recognized that this was the point at which the 'game' would diverge based on the player's choices. But whose choices would it take into consideration? Ash’s saving everyone? Sai’s killing everyone? Or her own relative innocence?

It seemed as though even the game itself couldn’t decide, because it glitched out completely, leaving Celadon alone, once more, in the darkness.

Suddenly, there floated a glowing button with a single word embossed upon its surface.

'Reset.'

Celadon reached out and pressed it.
And the world went white.

Celadon awoke on a bed of flowers.

This could be a good thing.

Interestingly, this was the first time that unconsciousness had not caused diffusion.

Ash and Sai were still fused. She still existed.

"I don't believe it," said a maliciously gleeful voice. "You were stupid enough to come back!"

"Fuck you, Flowey," said Celadon. She then moved forward, planning to leave Flowey behind…

but that was as far as she got before being thrown to the ground by a fireball.

"What a terrible creature," said Toriel, as Flowey morphed into Asriel and went to clutch at her
skirts, "...menacing such a poor, innocent youth."

Celadon blinked. "He's killed at least as many people as I have," she pointed out. As many as Sai
had, at any rate, she added in her thoughts.

"None of that was real, child," said Toriel. "It was a story, and we its actors. But now the play has
ended, the curtains closed, and the players left to return to their normal lives. At the moment, we are
concerned, not with his actions, but with yours."

Celadon swallowed. "Can we talk about this?"

"Why?" asked Sans, stepping out of the shadows, the other boss monsters emerging behind him.
"You never seemed willing to talk before."

"Well, then," said Celadon, as she eyed the row of monsters spread out before her, blocking the way
forward, "I suppose there's no particular reason why my life shouldn't be awful."

Then her soul was pulled from her body, red, as both Ash and Sai's were, and into the combat zone
between them.

The action menu appeared before her, and Celadon went straight to 'talk,' balking for a moment, as
no fewer than eleven options appeared before her, one to talk to each of the boss monsters.

She selected Flowey's.

'Flowey has nothing to say to you.'

Then, her soul was assaulted on all sides by spears, lasers, fireballs, and of course, friendliness
pellets.

'Celadon!' she heard the faint voices of Ash and Sai call out to her as her soul cracked in half, 'Stay
Determined!'

Celadon continued.

All the boss monsters always challenged her to combat at the same time. Celadon decided that the
challenge was most likely not going to be beating them, but in managing to end combat without
dying. Because even the option to run, previous attempts had shown her, still wouldn't let her escape.
Not so long as they followed.

In the spaces between resets, Celadon meditated and began developing a plan.

For it to work, she needed to diffuse in a controlled manner, and she needed to get Ash and Sai to go along with it.

Garnet had been able to talk with Ruby and Sapphire in some sort of controlled meditation, Celadon remembered, so it should definitely be possible.

She worked on it.

While fighting, Celadon found herself alternating between frustration and exasperation. If Sai hadn't killed absolutely everyone, then they might not all have been furious with her, and this fight might be easier.

On the other hand, if Ash *had* killed people, then there might not be as many bosses to fight, and the fight would *also* be easier.

Celadon sighed. "The cruel and the compassionate. Both walk not the middle road."

She eventually managed to reach Ash and Sai while meditating.

Celadon looked upon her components and sighed. "Anything to say for yourselves?"

Ash giggled. "Don't look at me."

Sai shrugged. "If you don't blame Ender, then you can't blame me, either."

A few minutes later, things had been hashed out, and all that was left was to put their plan into practice.

Which meant that in a few minutes, Celadon would once again cease to exist.

Before her, the Reset Button glowed with golden light, and she hesitated. She had a thought to finish, and she wouldn't have the opportunity for who-knows-how-long, so... might as well do it now.

The thing was, Celadon loved Ash and Sai. It was hard not to love people who basically died so that she could exist.

And, because she loved them, Celadon couldn't love herself. For all that Garnet had existed for a solid five-thousand years... Celadon was under no illusions about the fact that she, herself, was the Fusion equivalent of Tuvix. Certainly, she was an individual, with her own personality, wants, and desires... but she could only pursue them by erasing her components... her very selves. And, in this situation, as Captain Janeway had already pointed out, the other two lives outweighed her own.

She genuinely cared for Sai and Ash. She wanted to help them, for them to be able to call on her, should they have need. And that required that she keep their trust.

And so, Celadon couldn't allow herself to live. Couldn't allow herself to even *want* to live, because such an act would be a betrayal of her component personalities.

She wouldn't turn this into a competition, or a tug of war over selfhood. She gave up. She lost. End
of story. And, anyway, weren't there more important things to be thinking about?

So what if she was afraid to disappear?

Didn't meant she wouldn't do it anyway.

Celadon pressed the button.

Sure enough, during the next battle the action menu contained a new option labeled, "Unfuse."

Celadon unfused, slow and controlled, knowing that if her components flew off in opposite directions, this would be over before it even started.

Between one heartbeat and the next, Celadon was gone, and Cultivar Muscovite held a knife to the throat of a sobbing Clara Hart.

"Spare us or the human gets it," snarled Muscovite.

All the bosses spared them.

And they ran.

Not away, but out.
Chapter 13

It has been said that an infinite number of monkeys, on an infinite number of typewriters, hitting keys randomly for all eternity would, eventually, write a complete biography of Alexander Hamilton.

This is true; however, it is an overly narrow view of the situation.

What most people fail to take into account is that those infinite monkeys would also eventually write every Hamilton fanfic ever posted, including the Tony Award-Winning Broadway Musical extravaganza.

The sheer length and breadth of infinity, by definition, cannot be made comprehensible by breaking it into smaller chunks, which is why the infinite farm is a terrifying, terrifying place, and also why any dimensional travelers who think too hard about what they're attempting usually wind up going insane.

"The Multiverse is infinite," Bill Cipher had told them, after Celadon had unfused into Ash and Sai, "But that doesn't mean it's all interconnected. The more similar two places are, the harder it is to travel between them."

He turned to Ash. "You should think of it like ecological niches. You can have lions and hyenas in the same environment, but they'll live in the same places and eat the same food. It's a zero sum game. Hurt for the one is help for the other. Same thing with dimensions. You wanna go to a universe where pandas rule the earth? Easy! You want to go to a universe where everything's the same except for someone's eye color? Gonna be a lot tougher order to fill, Pollyanna."

"But how would we travel at all?" said Sai.

"Couple different methods," said Bill. "For starters, you can expand your horizons until you understand sixth-dimensional spatial fractals… or you can be judged as unbalanced by a bunch of wannabe gods and have them do it for you."

Ash blinked… "You're saying that we already…"

"Have that ability? Yeah. Wasn't meant to be used the way you're using it, but sure!"

He turned to Sai. "You should think of it like force vector arrows. They assigned a force and a direction to each of you that throws you back and forth between your 'home' dimensions and the 'afterlife.' The vectors switch directions when you sleep, but the force remains constant."

Ash frowned. "I feel like I should be concerned by those quotation marks."

Sai cocked her head. "So, when we're Celadon the vectors add?"

"Vase Face? Yeah she kind of screws with everything. It's not straight addition, though, it's a cross product. Now, unless you want to complicate the math horribly, there are three things you need to know: one, your two vectors form a set of axes in six dimensional 'space,' so by fiddling with the intensity you can travel on any plane you need to; two, enough meditation and/or sleep-deprivation and you should be able to flip the vectors' directions at will, and without sending you anywhere; three, while you can shorten the vectors' length by having your fusion adjust how much of each of your personalities she channels, you can also increase their force component through recursive fusion."
Ash blinked. "We can do what through what?"

Ash and Sai fell into sleep simultaneously, thanks to one of Sai's viruses, leaving the underground behind them.

They woke up in another blank phantom Dorm Room, thankfully without laptops this time, and immediately fused.

Celadon sat down and began meditating.

Her reasoning went thus:

Neither she nor her components understood the fine mechanics of dimensional travel. All they had was a black box technique and a vague and overly-simplistic analogy to work with.

Fortunately, it sounded as though the number of possible universes they had to sift through was limited.

But, then again, a fraction of infinity was still infinity.

Still, Celadon supposed, there was no reason she shouldn't at least start by doing the obvious thing.

She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

When she opened her eyes, her first thought was that she was seeing Mount Rushmore.

However, this impression was broken with the realization that there were three faces instead of four… and that they were distinctly more… animalistic… than she'd expected.

Naruto, she decided, but certainly not canon. Not if what she was seeing was accurate.

"Ninjas," Celadon moaned, in despair. "Why did it have to be ninjas?"

Well, confused as she was, it was obvious what her next move had to be. At this point, Celadon was practically an expert.

She went down to a busy intersection, sat down in full lotus position, then froze, motionless as a sculpture.

Until she was knocked unconscious, and woke up tied to a chair. Standing in the shadows were two people.

"Who are you?"

"Celadon."

"What are you doing in Konoha?"

"I was sent here against my will."

"By who?"

"Maat. The Egyptian Goddess of Balance."

"For what purpose?"
"To achieve balance."

"'Balance?'"

"By their judgment, I am a 'bad' person. I must become a 'better' one."

"We have people capable of verifying your story. Would you be willing to cooperate?"

"I would. I have information that you should know, which would require independent verification, anyway."

"What sort of information?"

"Classified information. Fictional information. Possibly prophetic information."

"Very well, then. Let's begin."

Twelve hours later:

"...what... was that?"

"Let me answer your questions with a question: is Icha Icha Paradise a thing here?"

"Yes, a book series, but how does that relate to any of this?"

"Can you imagine that there might be other worlds in existence? Not just other nations, across the sea, yet to be discovered, but other worlds? So far and distant that their suns appear to us as mere stars?"

"Imagine, yes. Believe in, no."

"Well, then, just imagining for now. Can you imagine a world where everything in Icha Icha Paradise was real? That there was a real world that the author on this world drew inspiration from, without ever knowing it was real?"

"Where are you going with this?"

"I come from worlds where the Elemental Nations and their people are nothing but stories. This is good news for you, in that my knowledge of the stories may tell you information about your world that would be useful. The bad news is that I never actually read the main story. In other terms, I've never read Icha Icha myself, I've only read stories that fans of the work have written, due to either extreme love or extreme hatred of the story itself."

"There's only so far afield you can stray from source material."

"It's wider than you might think. I have never read the official story, but, after reading others fanworks, I, myself, was inspired to write a story where your Third Hokage declares war against the moon. It was extremely well received by the fandom."

"In short, the story takes place after the reign of the Fourth Hokage, and likely contains a veritable goldmine of information... but that information is mired in a sea of self-indulgence, wish-fulfillment, and extremely poor grammar."

"Do you have any proof?"
"I have copies of my favorites, if you would allow me the use of my arms?"

Her arms were unbound.

She brought a hand to her gem and removed a tablet. "Is your world familiar with electronics?"

"Yes," said the voice.

"The stories you're looking for should be categorized as 'Naruto.'"

"This is a story about a human."

"It's not about your universe, no, but that doesn't mean the information it contains is completely useless. Just that it'll need to be verified. Keep the tablet. Consider it a gift."

"What about you?" asked one of the figures.

"What?" asked Celadon.

"What do you want?"

"I'm… not sure how to answer that question."

"You were sent here against your will, you said. What do you want out of life? What motivates you?"

Celadon thought. "Well, for my components, the answers would probably be 'spite' and 'double spite,'" she allowed. "But I am more than merely the sum of my parts… I would say, I want to express myself. My components are both so uptight, it's hilarious to unfuse and leave them with something that's the product of parts of themselves that they never normally let see the light of day. My existence is, by nature, transient. And, unfortunately, it's always been a lonely one. My components are the only friends I've ever had, and we can't truly exist at the same time. I want to grow, and I want the same for them. I want to perfect the art of relay running, transposed onto life… but I doubt I'll get the chance to do any of that."

"Why not?"

"Because I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep."

Celadon split in half. Ash and Sai remained tied together, though the chains tying them to the chair must have counted as clothing, judging by the fact that their torsos weren't crushed during the diffusion. The two of them immediately went to sleep and vanished.

The lights came up and human-sized avatars of the Six Tails and the Nine Tails exchanged glances.

The Nine Tails wore the Hokage's Hat.

"I'll have intelligence look through this… device," the Six Tails said.

"Good idea," said the Nine Tailed Fox.

Once back in a different phantom room, they fused again into Celadon.

She could always keep going forward, she supposed, looking through universes until she found the right one.
But there was no guarantee that going in a 'straight line' as she was doing, would get her anywhere.

And if she used meditation to vary the direction of her 'vectors’… that still wouldn't do anything if she didn't know where she was going. Knowing how things worked didn’t mean that Celadon knew what she was doing, after all.

The limited nature of her universe jumps had been the only thing keeping them relatively comprehensible. From her starting point in the Dorm Room, she knew where the vectors would lead her. The combinations of fusion, fisson, wakefulness, and sleep which would take her to Muscovite's home dimension, Clara's home Dimension, and the Alien/Trek dimension, which Celadon supposed was the closest thing she herself had to a home.

But when she'd been taken to the Underground, that had also been a dimensional jump, hadn't it? A jump that didn't use her convenient little system. The 'vector arrow' associated with it could have been in any direction or magnitude, and there was simply no way for Celadon to know.

It was like she'd had a computer script to run a very specific function, and now that the situation had changed, it was virtually useless.

 Granted, this was only a problem because she wanted to get back to where she had been. From the point of view of hiding from the law, this was a pretty sweet setup, because Celadon was fairly certain that, if even she didn't know where she was, then Maat wouldn't be able to find her either. She could continue worldwalking, and enjoying herself, in relative freedom, with this new change.

… but she'd promised to meet back with the Romulans in six months… four months, now.

Granted, it wasn't so much a 'promise,' as 'we'll meet back up if we're still free.' Free had a lot of meanings associated with it. It could mean, 'had enough free time,' it could mean, 'if it's reasonably easy,' and the situation had certainly changed. Celadon was certain that the Hive would understand.

… but she'd made a 'promise' so she might as well exhaust all her options before giving up, even if they were ridiculously risky.

Because there was another way that Celadon could think of to get back to her destination.

Go back to the beginning.

It was possible that this would do nothing but complicate things further, but Celadon figured it was still worth a shot. She, Ash, and Sai had first spent a few months wandering around the nearby dimensions, but all they'd done there was lose flash drives, tablets, and various stacks of paper with alarmingly increasing frequency. They were out of electronics and out of options. This really was the only thing left that any of them could think of to try.

She was due to meet the Romulans sometime today anyway, so if this didn't work, she'd just give up, knowing she'd tried her best.

It was possible also that all souls went to the same afterlife, but Celadon doubted it. With so many worlds, why would all of them funnel to an Egyptian afterlife when not all universes even had an Egypt in the first place?

It could be that all souls went to the afterlife of the universe they died in, but again, Celadon doubted it. What with Cipher's comments about Sixth Dimensional Beings being able to travel universes intuitively, it seemed that some contingency would have been set in place already for such cases.
Thus, by Celadon's reasoning, it seemed likely that Ash and Sai's souls had been 'earmarked' so to speak for that particular afterlife, on the off chance that they died outside their home dimension.

Celadon's soul was a combination of theirs, so it should possess a similar tag, if such a thing existed.

No real evidence to go on, but this would give them all more information, and that was worth something, too.

Celadon drew a shimmering grenade from her cheek and stared at it. Sai didn't have good memories of this virus, but Celadon was certain that it would work.

She crushed it and closed her eyes, breathing deep and evenly.

When Celadon awoke, she was standing on a riverbed, the surface of the water at least ten feet above her head. She sighed out a stream of bubbles in relief. So far so good.

She walked, carefully, to the surface, verified that it looked like the river from Ash and Sai's memories, and performed a controlled Fisson.

Ash and Sai fell asleep.

Ash woke up in her bedroom, and went back to sleep.

Sai woke up in a deserted car wash, and went back to sleep.

Both woke up in the apartment that they'd shared for more than a decade.

"We did it!" exclaimed Sai, as the two hugged and fused into Celadon, who immediately dropped into sleep.

...and awoke on the bridge of a starship, crewed entirely by Vulcans.

Correction. By *humanoid* Vulcans.

Celadon would have started swearing out of frustration, but the emotion proved too much for her and she cracked straight down the middle, Ash and Sai flung apart in the wake of her defusion.

Meanwhile, in Steven's Universe, they were just finishing Season Nine.

"We could have recruited Lapis, Peridot, and Jasper?" said Amethyst.

"We could have stopped the Cluster with a hug?" said Steven.

"We could have redeemed the DIAMONDS?" said Pearl.

"Is there any way to go back and change things?" asked Steven.

"There just might be," said Garnet.
"I am Captain Solok of the Starship T'kumbra," said the Vulcan who faced them. "Who are you, and what is your purpose in invading my vessel?"

Ash and Sai exchanged a glance.

"That's Clara Hart," said Sai, jerking a thumb in Ash's direction.

"She's Cultivar Muscovite," said Ash, as she grabbed Sai's hand.

Sai tugged, and Ash used the momentum to twirl closer, as their bodies dissolved into light.

"And I'm Celadon," said the tiny fusion, as she came into being. "My components and I are interdimensional fugitives on the run from various godlike authorities for being unbalanced perpetrators of genocide. I believe we may have overshot our target universe. I was trying to reach a universe I'd visited six months ago, but… this appears to be a different plane altogether."

"How so?"

"I was over in the Neutral Zone, so the only people I saw were Romulans, but… they were a different species than you appear to be. And I had thought that, in most universes, Romulans and Vulcans shared a common ancestor. That would imply that this is not my target destination."

"A not entirely illogical conclusion."

With that, Celadon split up, deliberately this time, and Ash and Sai looked to see what the Vulcan's next move would be.

"You appear to be a human," said Captain Solok, to Ash.

He turned to Sai. "And you, a Gem."

Sai nodded, warily. "That's right."

"Would your presence be related to the Romulans Diaspore, Mesolite, Dionysus, and Athena?"

Sai blinked. "… yes, actually."

"You were not entirely wrong in your assumptions," Captain Solok informed them. "However, you should be aware that there are two distinct sub-species of Vulcans. And of Romulans. We were informed of your arrival, and that you might react… emotionally, to one of those subspecies."

Ash's legs gave out underneath her.

"Ash?"

Ash held out a hand, in silent request for fusion.

Sai tugged her to her feet and Celadon was formed.
"I don't get it," thought Sai, within the fusion, where they wouldn't be overheard, as Celadon looked on in concern. "You told me Vulcans and Romulans were the same species with different culture. Isn't this just confirmation?"

"No," thought Ash, "Because the divide between Romulans and Vulcans is philosophical."

"So?"

"So, with the ancestors, that's easy enough to guess. At some point, the common ancestor's home was invaded by Xenomorphs. The difference between the Romulans and the Vulcans is that the Vulcans chose logic over emotion."

"What if, in this case, rather than go to war with their alien overlords as the Romulans apparently did... they learned to live with them?"

"What do you...?"

"'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.' Old Vulcan proverb. After all, if the alternative is extinction, then it's logical to sacrifice a few, or even a percentage, of your species as hosts in an effort to save the rest. Nowadays, that wouldn't even involve dying."

"Logical," thought Sai. "Depending on how good their medical tech is, then willing hosts may very well be at a premium. We need to be careful."

"Agreed," thought Ash.

"Want to swap bodies, just in case?" Sai offered.

"What?" thought Ash, taken completely off-guard.

"That way, even if they try to use the human as an incubator, it'll be me. And if one of us has to do it... well, it's my turn, is all I'm saying."

Ash hesitated. "You're sure you don't mind?"

"Not in the least," Sai assured her.

"Sai... thank you," said Ash, her voice weak with relief.

With that, Celadon split up.

"Thank you for your concern," said Ash as Muscovite, faintly. "However, we're not quite that delicate. Celadon acts as a stabilizing influence for the both of us."

Sai, as Clara Hart nodded. "Would it be possible for us to speak with the four Romulans?"

Captain Solok regarded them with a long, level stare. "That can be arranged," he said, standing and walking towards the turbolift. "Follow me, if you would."

They exchanged a glance, and did so.

As they followed Solok through the corridors, they noticed that, in addition to the pointy-eared humanoid Vulcans with which Ash was familiar, there were roughly an equal amount of Xenomorphs, who, in this universe, were also apparently Vulcans.

Solok pressed a panel next to a door, which slid open, revealing a conference room. Inside which
were Diaspore, Mesolite, Athena, and Dionysus.

Even though it had only been six months, Diaspore had grown, noticeably. The others hadn't, of if they had it was only a few inches. But, then again, they weren't Queens.

Solok paused. "Do you require a mediator?"

"No," said Ash, "but thank you."

Solok left.

They moved forwards past the doors, which closed behind them, leaving the two of them alone with the four kids.

Their four kids.

Sai moved over immediately to inspect them for injury, while Ash just stood there, blinking.

"Are you all right?" Clara Hart asked.

"Yes, Ash," said Diaspore. "We're fine."

"She's actually Sai at the moment," said Muscovite. "This… can't be the Romulan Empire."

"This is the Federation," Dionysus confirmed.

"You were captured?" asked Sai.

"We defected," Mesolite corrected.

Ash frowned. She leaned forward and poked Sai in the shoulder. "This is all your fault," she said.

Sai blinked. "I'm fairly certain that it's actually yours. Nine seasons of Steven is enough to turn anyone over to the light side."

"That's your world, so it's your fault."

"Your alignment, your fault."

"It… wasn't that," said Athena.

The two of them turned to look at her in expectation.

"Meeting you two, it was like waking up. We can't just go back to sleep, regardless of whether it would be easier or not."

"Does Solok…?"

"We told the Federation that we were swayed by the androids."

Ash sighed in relief. "Good," she said. "I don't regret what we did… but that doesn't mean that I ever want to do it again. And I don't know nearly enough about the Vulcans in this universe to trust them."

"They appear to abide by the laws of the Federation."
"That sounds promising," said Sai. "But by no means definitive."

Ash spoke up. "Of more immediate concern, perhaps, is the fact that Sai managed to commit genocide in the last six months, while we were away. We undid it via time-travel, but Celadon, Sai, and possibly even me, have still got prices on our heads."

"That wasn't genocide," Sai muttered, combing a hand through Clara's hair in an unconscious gesture of stress, "it was entrapment."

Ash shook Muscovite's head, unimpressed. "Oh, whatever, Sai. You guys do anything noteworthy in the last few months?" Ash went on, looking to the Romulans. "Besides defection, I mean."

"We repaired the android crew of the ship," said Mesolite. "Then we spent most of the time since then convincing them to come with us to the Federation."

"Shouldn't have taken as long as it did," said Diaspore. "The Romulan Empire doesn't even grant rights to artificial life forms."

"We've only been here for two and half weeks," said Dionysus. "It took some time for them to coordinate an extraction from the neutral zone. Especially considering how near we were to the Romulan border."

"By the way," said Athena, "how exactly did you two manage to switch bodies?"

"By the way," said Athena, "how exactly did you two manage to switch bodies?"

The video stopped playing as one of the T'Kumbra's officers paused the viewscreen.

"Clearly," said Captain Solok, "'Cultivar Muscovite' and 'Clara Hart' are not being honest with us."

"The two entities jump between the two bodies at will. One of them is Ash, the other is Sai," Security Chief T'rel observed. "The bodies are Clara Hart and Cultivar Muscovite."

"We cannot trust them," said First Officer Saavik. "What were they doing in the Neutral Zone to begin with?"

"Humans have a history of xenophobia and tyranny," observed Communications Officer Vorik.

"Humans of this universe," corrected Chief Engineer L'Vor.

"Our universe is the only one from which we may gather data," said Science Officer Sarissa, "It is far more likely that they are lying about dimensional travel."

"We'll simply have to keep observing," said Captain Solok.

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So Solok, Saavik, and Vorick are from various canon instances of Star Trek, the rest of the names came from: kirshara (dot) wordpress (dot) com (slash) tag (slash) vulcan-names
"I have slaughtered planets full of innocents," seethed Sai. "I have created plagues which wiped entire species off the starmaps. But this?" she tugged down the only-technically-a-skirt which she'd been badgered into wearing. "This hurts my soul, Ash."

"Oh, quit being melodramatic and let me fix your hair," said Ash, completely unconcerned by Sai's ranting.

"Why?" Sai balked. "I don't have much good to say about the Vulcans, but at least they don't think that beehive updos and miniskirts are still in fashion."

"If we're in this universe anyway," began Ash, "then, damn it, I'm going to cosplay. And you're going to do it too, so I don't feel weird. If the kids can do it, then so can you."

"I don't care what the show was like, there's no way the Federation is as white as they are painted," said Sai. "Believe me, I know space empires. Dig deep enough and there's always corruption."

Ash just giggled. "Every party needs a pooper; that's why we invited you."

"No, but..." Sai wrenched herself away from Ash, dropping into a desk chair, picking up the Padd that was on the table. "Do you know what first contact between Humans and Vulcans was like in this universe?"

"I have a guess," said Ash, perching on the bed where she could see also. "I take it you found the historical records?"

Without a word, Sai started the recording.

The first part of the footage detailed Cochrane breaking the warp barrier, after which a ship appeared, landed, and an alien emerged.

And, to the watching humans, it truly was an alien: black exoskeleton, far too many teeth, no eyes visible, and a whipcord tail.

The beige robe it wore did very little to lessen the intimidation factor.

"Live long and prosper," said the being, and underneath the English of the universal translator could be heard a painfully inhuman screech.

For a brief moment, there was silence, before the screams and gunshots started.

Sai turned off the recording.

"I haven't done much research," admitted Ash, "But I did find out that the Borg are part of the Federation in this universe and the Trill are not. Sounds like it's free game for whose part of what faction. And there's no reason that the Vulcans here shouldn't be good guys."
Sai shook her head. "Even if they are good people, they have no reason to have anything but hatred for humanity. And we haven't exactly had the best experiences here, either."

Ash shrugged. "You remember what Garnet said. And what we did. And where we are. Far as I see it, we're living on borrowed time. And, hey. I got twenty years my first life, seventeen my second. Thirty-seven might be half the human average, but it's more than some people get."

"But if we ran we could have even more time."

"Maybe," admitted Ash. "But running comes with its own risks, as we saw with the game. This place, at least, seems relatively safe. And, as far as I'm concerned, escaping our cage means we already won."

"We should at least see what's out there."

"Okay," said Ash.

Sai pulled out a grenade, and a moment later they fell into sleep.

Fifteen minutes later, the two of them were back, and looking deeply, deeply unsettled. Wordlessly, they held hands and Celadon formed, hugging herself, and looking shell-shocked. A few minutes later, she mitosed back into Ash and Sai, who didn't look much better.

"Well, that settles it," said Sai, flopping down onto the bed. "We're staying here."

"Probably for the best," agreed Ash, looking smug.

"Oh, shut up," said Sai, wadding up a sock and throwing it at her.

It hit Ash in the head, before unfurling and falling to the floor. Ash just grinned, unconcernedly.

"You say that now, but I will convince you of this place's idealism. Consider it payback."

That brought Sai up short. "For what?"

"I..." Ash announced, placing a hand on her chest, "am a walking cliché. So, I suppose it only natural that my character development should be equally trite. Simply put: as a child, I loved stories, especially Disney Movies, along with the Saturday Morning and Sunday Night Cartoons... and there was a part of me that was always frustrated when said media played it safe. Negative Continuity on The Simpsons, Beauty Equals Goodness in Disney, and static, static characters as far as the eye can see everywhere else."

"What?" said Sai, unimpressed. "So I showed you that Animation Renaissances are a thing? Not exactly rocket science, Ash."

"No," said Ash, "but it is poetic. Me, a cynic, so convinced I'd never find what I wanted that I stopped looking altogether, not even giving cartoons a chance anymore, even when, unbeknownst to me, they were everything ten-year-old me had ever wanted in entertainment."

Sai was skeptical. "And you propose to pay this forward how?"

"We are characters drawn from the same template. Obviously, your character development is the same as mine! I always wanted phenomenal cartoons, but years of disappointment had convinced me that they didn't exist. Extrapolating forward, you want for there to be a space utopia where everyone really is a brighter shade of idealist, but millennia of dealing with the Gempire's military and
bureaucracy have left you devoid of hope that such a thing could ever exist. Therefore I, Ash Hughes, make a promise you, Saino Moore: I will show you the light of this world, or become really frustrated trying!"

"Not 'die trying'?"

"Death is cheap," said Ash, waving a hand, airily. "That would be a cop out."

"You can try," allowed Sai. "But I certainly wouldn't hold your breath." She thought of something. "Should you really be putting more stress on yourself? Aren't you still kind of emotionally scarred over the Nostromo?"

"Yeah, but so what?" said Ash. "I can multitask. Speaking of, I'm not sure getting you to appreciate optimism will be enough. I've got to get you to appreciate camp, too, don't I?"

"Good luck," scoffed Sai. "As far as camp goes, well... your kink is not my kink, and that's okay."

Ash blinked. "Wait, are you serious? But Musicals! Sixties Batman! Just about any comedic anime!"

She huffed. "Well, at least I'm not in denial about what I like, even if I do have problems with judging books by their covers."

"And with being cruel to be kind," Sai added. "And with internalizing the flaws of your own society."

"Oh, like you haven't?" said Ash.

"I try to dismantle them, at least," said Sai. "But you, as you are now, are unlikely to learn anything that you don't already know by consuming media. For all that you claim my mind is closed against ideas... one breakthrough does not a genius make."

"Is that why you're always trying to make me watch anime and read fanfiction?"

"That was mostly to try making you less homophobic. Which worked, I might add."

"Well, I, for one, have some concept of 'fair for its day.' No writer is a child of angels... not even those who may literally be children of angels."

"I'm under no obligation to watch things which make me uncomfortable."

"Why would I watch a sitcom when I could be re-watching Trigun?"

There was no telling how long they might have continued sniping at each other, but at that point, they were interrupted by the door signal.

"Come!" yelled Ash, grinning like a dork at the reference which she would never get tired of making.

It was Dionysus. "We're about to have lunch in the mess hall. Would you care to join us?"

"Sure!" said Ash. "Sai?"

"Coming, coming," muttered Sai. "Just let me change..." She looked up to see that Dionysus was wearing a beehive wig and a red miniskirt. "Oh God, you were serious," she said, as Ash accepted a
wig and clothes from him, and proceeded to put them on over her physical form (Ash had no interest in changing Muscovite's physical form, especially not for a joke, but she did still want to join in on the fun).

"Why would you think I wasn't?" said Ash. "Come on!"

Sai got up, reluctantly, to follow them.

The three of them arrived at the mess hall, to find Diaspore, Mesolite, and Athena already there, and eating through vast piles of meat which looked so raw as to still be bleeding.

Ash and Sai went to adjacent replicators, Ash motioning for Dionysus to go first.

Thus, Ash was the last one to join their table.

"Ash," began Sai, "is that… a bowl full of sugar?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because the replicator isn't programmed with any Earth dishes, and I remember the molecular structure of sucrose." She crunched down on a handful of sugar crystals before continuing with her mouth full. "What are you eating?"

"A Vulcan dish I was recommended. I don't remember its name."

"Excuse me."

They looked over to find themselves faced with a species they'd never encountered before.

"Yes?" said Sai.

"I'm Lieutenant Lexington of the USS Manhattan. My friends and I were wondering… would you like a tour of our ship?"


"That sounds edifying," agreed Diaspore. "Does after lunch work for you?"

"Sure," said the Lieutenant.

As he went back to his table, Ash stared after him, trying to remember where she'd seen that species before. She was sure that she had, but what franchise? Maybe Enterprise? She'd stopped watching that one halfway through, and hadn't seen any of those episodes more than once.

Oh well. It would come to her sooner or later, if it truly was important. For now she'd focus on the free tour they'd be getting. They'd been shown the T'Kumbra and had found it boring, and they weren't expecting much out of this 'USS Manhattan' either. But the fact that they'd been specifically sought out?

Now that was worth following up on.
First update was a 20k chunk. This time it was 10k. By Zeno's Paradox, I'll never reach 40k words.

In all seriousness, though, I'm expecting part two to have at least seven more chapters in it, I just wanted to get this segment out first because it ends the main 'setup' portion of the fic. After this things actually start happening 'onscreen' as it were, and not off in a timeskip or glossed over in a later conversation.

Still have no idea what the update schedule will be. Thanks for your patience thus far!
"This is a horrible, horrible trap," muttered Sai, as they trailed behind the kids, who were heading back to their quarters to drop off a few things, and after which they would all be going off to investigate this whole 'ship tour' deal. 

"How so?" asked Ash. All of her and Sai's possessions were stored in Muscovite's Gem, thus the two of them were in no hurry whatsoever.

"The guy had green skin," Sai pointed out, "and wings, and fangs, and you're asking me 'how so'?"

Ash just shook her head. "Whatever you say, space racist."

"You're oversimplifying things," said Ash, waving a hand dismissively. "That's like saying that humans exemplify empathy as a cardinal virtue."

"Well," Sai began, doubt obvious in her eyes, "don't you?"

"No," said Ash, "because a true empath—unencumbered by logic—will act to eliminate all sources of suffering, resulting in a Brave New World Scenario."

At this point, they'd reached the kids' quarters. Ash and Sai leaned against the wall outside, as they continued their conversation.

A conversation in which Sai was confused. "A what?"

Ash shook her head in disappointment. "Sai, you need to read more of the classics. Brave New World: a hedonism-based dystopia, where the populace is kept happy using drugs: one where infants have their intellectual capacity blunted based on assignment in an arbitrary caste system, so that they won't be unhappy with the menial drudgery they're required to undertake as 'work."

"So, what, you're saying that a balance between empathy and logic is needed for any society?" Sai said, her tone skeptical. "Not everything can be solved by a 'middle of the road' compromise."

"As a matter of fact, that is not what I'm saying," said Ash. "My own personal feelings on the matter are that all truly enlightened societies are based on love."

"An emotion," Sai pointed out.

Ash shook her head. "Not affection, Sai, love. Agape if you're an ancient Greek: unconditional, universal love."

Sai scoffed. "The only way to feel love for everyone is to shut yourself away from actual people, and only consider the abstract concept of people."

Ash looked pained. "Sai, you really need to read more. Otherwise I'm just going to keep plagiarizing my favorite authors and you're going to keep thinking I'm a genius …" She sighed. "Love isn't a feeling, Sai. Haven't you ever heard of intellectual love?"

Sai considered the phrase. "Philanthropy, you mean?"
"Sort of," agreed Ash, "but it also applies on a small scale. C.S. Lewis wrote that, for humans, intellectual love always either arises from or descends down into, natural affection, and that **does** seem to be the way most of our brains are wired... but that this is not necessarily so for people that aren't human. To see another being and work for their best interest, without obligation, without familiarity, without even affection, but merely because they represent a fellow living creature... for Lewis, this was intellectual love: the love of angels. You look at Vulcans and expect to see a race of Machiavellian chessmasters, because that is what you have learned logic leads to... but from what I can see here, Lewis' concept is actually probably closer to the truth."

"But you're afraid of them," said Sai, her tone one of confusion.

"Well, yes," said Ash, looking surprised at Sai's last statement. "What, you think that a species being **good** stops them from being **terrifying**?"

"Uh... yeah?" said Sai, with the air of one stating the obvious.

Ash shook her head in disbelief. "Sai, why do you think that Sci-fi always portrays aliens as either being monsters or as unbearably arrogant asshats?"

"Because aliens are people?"

"I..." Ash deflated slightly, "...I can't even say you're wrong with that one, but I'm not about to let a decent point stop decent tirade. I was actually thinking about two specific reasons:"

Ash cleared her throat and held up her index finger. "...One, because Heinlein ruined 'holier than thou aliens' when Stranger in a Strange Land advocated free love and polytheism as two key principles of utopia, dooming any future 'virtuous aliens' story to be stereotyped as inappropriately political.

"And two," Ash continued, adding another finger to the tally, "because the concept of a species which is morally superior to humanity... is a brain-breaking concept for most people, since it implies that humans are both capable of improving ourselves and that we have an obligation to do so. And that **scare**s people. Thus, while the first type of story is called propaganda, the second is relegated to the realm of religious tripe or hopeless idealism."

"You're afraid of having to improve yourself?" said Sai, in disbelief. "You aren't the one with a death toll."

"True," Ash agreed, "but that doesn't really matter. Again, Lewis was something of a formative influence for me: *One man may be so placed that his anger kills thousands, another so that no matter how angry he gets he will only ever be laughed at.* What matters are our choices and how they affect the immortal soul. Much as 'I was only doing my job' is an unacceptable excuse... you were **brainwashed** for the entirety of your existence, and you shook it off anyway. Your soul shows positive development. And collateral damage isn't something that can always be controlled. From a moral standpoint, you're a far better person than I."

"You're altruistic," Sai said, her voice flat and unconvinced, "to the point of self-destruction."

"Yes," said Ash, "but you also have to look at my motivations. The martyr is not just the parent that goes back into the burning house to save their children... The martyr is also the person who enjoys making a spectacle of their own suffering, particularly to point out the flaws of others."

Upon seeing Sai's incredulous expression, Ash hastened to clarify.

"Yes," she began, "I often do things which help other people, but my actions don't come from a
place of compassion, they come from a place of contempt. Of the universe for not being a better place, of other people, for not stepping up to do what I view as their duty…. That kind of thing is not good for me, spiritually. I know this, and continue to do it. I am human, so doing good for others will likely lead to affection for those others eventually… but I am certainly not doing myself any favors in the interim."

"You really think that I'm a good person?" asked Sai, in a voice that was so quiet it almost wasn't there.

"I do," said Ash, emphasizing the statement with a nod.

Sai wiped her eyes and looked away, but said nothing.

A minute later, the kids were ready to go, and they set off to find the Manhattan.

Ash hadn't thought about why an Officer from the Manhattan would be eating on the T'Kumbra, but this was apparently because both vessels were docked at Deep Space Six for repairs and maintenance.

...which meant another long slog through the decks and turbolifts of said starship and space-station, because, according to Security Chief T'rel, 'Transporters are not for recreational use when one's legs are perfectly functional.' Jerk.

...which meant Ash and Sai were still going at it.

"You can't base an argument off of the fact that this universe adheres to Star Trek rules when it clearly doesn't," Sai was saying.

"The presence of Xenomorphs does seem to run rather counter to the Trek philosophy, wouldn't you think?"

"Um, no?" said Ash. "I mean, when you get down to it, Xenomorphs really aren't that different from the Trill..."

"You mentioned those earlier," said Sai. "Which ones are they, again?"

"In this universe?" said Ash. "Chaotic evil. In The Next Generation and Deep Space Nine? They were a race of benign parasites hosted in volunteers from a sister species. They couldn't exist for any length of time outside a host body, and there was always personality mixing. Unless both parties were very explicitly okay with that sort of situation, things tended to get very unsettling very fast… and yet the Trill were unquestioned members of the Federation."

Ash flashed Sai a significant look. "Sai, Star Trek may be optimistic, but that doesn't make it nice. There are empires which make lives hell for their citizens. There are species which prey on others for sport. The significance lies not in the presence of darkness, but in the triumph of light. And, really, I think you're overlooking many obvious similarities between the Vulcan subspecies."

"How so?"

"In the Star Trek of my childhood," said Ash, "Vulcans were ruthlessly logical, bent on controlling and repressing their emotions through meditation, and very little was known about Vulcan mating practices."
"What?" said Sai, certain that she couldn't have heard the last part correctly.

Ash nodded in satisfaction. "In The Original Series, this was because the Vulcans were embarrassed about Pon Farr, an animalistic mating ritual undergone every seven years."

Sai's interest was immediately piqued. "Wait, was that the Kirk and Spock shirtless wrestling thing?"

"There was… quite a bit more to it than that," said Ash, sounding nonplussed. "Why?"

Sai looked shell shocked. "Ash, that scene almost singlehandedly gave birth to the genre of slash-fiction."

"…dare I ask how?"

"It was a 'fuck or die' situation, right?" said Sai, not truly needing the confirmation, but asking anyway. "And it was resolved by sweaty half-naked grappling between two 'manly bros' with a 'strong friendship'? Yeah, that's shipping fuel if I've ever seen it…"

"Seriously?" Ash made a face. "No, combat is a perfectly canonical way to resolve Pon Farr... though I admit that later series may have simply written it that way to cover up The Original Series' plot holes."

"…well, I guess any show that integral to fanfic as we know it can't be all bad," Sai allowed. "But I still don't trust this place."

Ash shrugged. "It's a start."

"We're here," Dionysus interjected, stepping forward to access a communications panel. "I do hope that you two have gotten most of... that out of your systems?"

Sai snickered. "We can shut up," she assured him. Ash nodded as well, zipping her lips. "We know how to behave in polite company," Sai finished.

Just then, the airlock door opened, and their guide was revealed. He was the same species that 'Lieutenant Lexington' had been: humanoid, but with technicolor skin—dark blue, in this case—and also sporting wings, claws, and what Sai thought might be digitigrade legs, but hadn't taken enough biology to truly be certain.

"The tour group, yes?" said the man, and Ash gave a soft gasp. "Right this way," he continued, before turning back into the ship, obviously expecting them to follow.

Dionysus shot Ash a sharp look over his shoulder. Mesolite tossed her head, disdainfully. Diaspore and Athena just sighed.

"What is it?" asked Sai, as they moved through the airlock to the starship.

"Oh my god," hissed Ash, in an awestruck whisper, "that guy sounds just like Michael Dorn!"
"Grease is a classic!" bellowed Ash.

"Grease is misogynistic trash!" shrieked Sai. "Completely changing yourself for a man? What kind of message is that supposed to send to young girls?"

Ash and Sai were in their quarters, and had gotten into a screaming match. Behind them, the four Romulans watched in fascination.

"Have you ever actually seen the musical?" asked Ash, incredulous. "The guy completely changed himself for the girl, too! It was a whole theme! Changing yourself for the people you love, that it's sometimes unnecessary, and how it goes both ways! It dovetailed nicely into the commentary on how teenagers are molded by their peer's expectations of them!"

"There was no diversity whatever!" exclaimed Sai. "Were there any characters of color at all? It reinforced harmful gender stereotypes, used unkind language, and generally represented unhealthy fifties nostalgia!"

"Fair. For. Its. Day," said Ash, punctuating each word for emphasis. "You can't blame writers just trying to make a living for using whatever then-socially-acceptable means they have at their disposal to entertain the audience. Or from taking the low road if the higher one is expected to lose them money. Are you saying we should ignore anything that makes us uncomfortable and pretend that those prejudices don't exist? Because that comes with its own set of problems."

"I'm saying," said Sai, "That there are plenty of other musicals out there that are far more deserving of your time and attention. Why defend this one?"

Ash looked at her roommate with an expression of absolute affront. "If it weren't for Grease," she said, quietly, and with the air of one about to play a trump card, "we probably never would have gotten Hairspray."

Sai blinked. "What's Hairspray?"

Ash exploded. "What's Hairspray?! Only one of those musicals that you would call 'far more deserving of my time!' Grease was written in the seventies about the fifties! Hairspray was written in the eighties about the sixties! Both are named after hair products! And, in contrast to Grease, Hairspray's central plot deals with racial segrega—"
"We appreciate your aid in this matter," said Solok.

"The pleasure is all mine," said Spock. "I desire to understand humanity, as they played a role in my infancy."

There was a brief, calculated pause.

"Your host," began Communication's Officer Vorik, "were they…?"

"I was incubated by a human," Spock clarified, "but it was unwilling: a human soldier who had attacked our ship, on orders from their commander in order to capture a Vulcan intermediate. After incubation, I was put in a lab. There humans attempted to experiment on me, but they underestimated my strength and I escaped. Still, I wish to make peace with the human empire."

"What do you think of our two guests?" asked Chief Engineer L'Vor.

"I would like more information before forming any sort of hypothesis on the matter," said Spock.

"We wish that we could provide it," said Science Officer Sarissa. "What little we know is this: the first recorded presence of the two entities comes from a stranded Romulan ship. A ship containing a deactivated android crew, and four Romulan eggs, which the two of them hatched and raised. The four children, whom they named Athena, Dionysus, Mesolite, and Diaspore, hold absolute loyalty to their two caretakers. We believe that this was planned, though we are uncertain how as the ship did not contain the resources necessary to hatch four Romulans, and the security logs appear to have been deleted. We are currently attempting to determine their motives, as we believe that this knowledge may aid us dealing with the Human Empire."

"What story have they given?" asked Spock.

"Our… 'guests,'" said First Officer Saavik, "claim to be from another universe. One in which our own universe is fictional. This much at least, appears to be true. Or at least an elaborately-done ruse, as they seem to have brought said fictional contents with them. This media content is currently undergoing scrutiny by the Federation's top scientists. Have you seen any of it yet?"

"I confess," said Spock, "I've not had the chance."

"You have access to the database," said Captain Solok, "but as for the highlights… Computer, play file 'Highlights Sixty-Four J.'"

The screen changed, showing footage of the character Spock from Star Trek TOS.

Spock was skeptical. "That… is not me. For one thing, that character is entirely the wrong subspecies."

"Indeed," said Solok. "I would advise you not to read too much into it. My own crew appears in the footage as well, at various points. Computer, play file 'Highlights Six.'"

The screen showed footage of Lt. Saavik from The Wrath of Khan, of Ensign Vorik from Voyager, and of the rest of the crew, including Captain Solok… from the Baseball episode of Deep Space Nine.

"As you can see," said Captain Solok, over the sniggering of the guests yet to be introduced, "the fictional data is riddled with inaccuracies, but it does contain valuable data."

"And my crew?" asked Captain Goliath of the USS Manhattan, speaking for the first time.
"Computer," said Solok, "Play file 'Highlights Manhattan.'"

They watched the ensuing footage, with much interest from the Manhattan's Officers

"We've given the bridge crew of the Manhattan access to the media the two brought with them," said Security Chief T'rel, once the video had finished.

"We'll definitely watch it," said Lieutenant Broadway.

Captain Solok nodded, then turned to Captain Goliath. "We request your cooperation and aid in studying these two. The fact that you and your crew appear in the media they brought may predispose them to trust you. Though, admittedly, you're far from the only ship we're calling in for that reason. Still, we believe you may be the 'characters' they're most familiar with. It is Ash who is most likely to recognize you, as the cartoon 'Gargoyles' came from her universe and aired at a time when children her age were typically interested in cartoons."

"This is an imposition on you," said First Officer Saavik, "It would require you opening your ship up to our surveillance, and a decrease in privacy for you and your officers. But we have a great opportunity here, and we ask your aid. We can guarantee that any private data recorded during this effort will be treated as classified and confidential. Please, take some time to think it over."

All of them turned to Science Officer Xanatos, a humanoid Vulcan He steepled his fingers in thought.

"We'll do it," he announced, and Captain Goliath nodded in agreement.

Present Day:

Ash, Sai, Athena, Mesolite, Dionysus, and Diaspore were being introduced to the Bridge Crew of the Manhattan by Security Chief Coldstone.

"Oh my God," said Ash, in an undertone. "It's Marina Sirtis."

Athena elbowed her in the side.

They were shown the Sick Bay.

"Oh my God," said Ash. "It's Kate Mulgrew."

Diaspore stepped on her foot.

They were shown the Rec Room.

"Oh My God," said Ash. "It's Brent Spiner."

Mesolite heaved a long-suffering sigh.

They were shown the science lab, but Security Chief Coldstone was called away before they could enter. They followed his instructions and went ahead anyway.

…where they found Science Officer Xanatos applying prosthetic ears.
He looked up, becoming alarmed. "I can explain."

Then, seeing their expressions of polite interest, he frowned. "What, no expressions of shock and disbelief?"

"Well, we have very little context for this world," said Sai, "So I'm exactly not sure what you were expecting."

"True enough," he admitted. "Well, the fact of the matter is, I'm a human. So are my wife and child, along with Security Officers Maza and Bluestone, as well as Ensign Tom. The Gargoyles are native to Earth, just as we are. We broke the ancient curse holding them in stone, and we all escaped the planet together. We may be different species, but we think of each other as family. Please, will you keep our secret?"

Sai glanced at Ash, who still appeared out of it, and shrugged. "Sure? I mean, we don't exactly have a horse in this race. So long as you're not hurting anyone, I see no reason to tell anybody. And if my opinion changes in the future, I'll give you warning before I act."

"We agree as well," said Dionysus.

"Thank you," said Xanatos.

After an awkward tour of the science lab, they were once again on their way.

"Well that was weird, wasn't it, Ash?" said Sai, as they left. "Ash?"

"Oh my God," said Ash. "That was Jonathan Frakes."

Sai facepalmed.

---

Two days later:

Sai and Ash were hanging out in the kids' quarters, the former scrolling through a Padd.

"Holy Fucking Shit," said Sai, her eyes going wide. Athena giggled.

"Language," said Ash, with a frown, tossing a cushion in an arc which hit Sai in the face. "What is it?"

"The Manhattan," said Sai, "It's Gargoyles."

Ash's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "Many of the crew are of the Gargoyle species, yes—"

"No, Ash, it was a show! A Disney Cartoon, no less!"

"Wait," Ash's eyes went distant. "Aired in the mid nineties? Around the same time as Darkwing Duck, Aladdin the TV Series, and Star Trek DS9?"

Sai blinked. "You've seen it?"

Ash shook her head. "No, my childhood self had very discerning taste. Dark and/or Action wasn't to my liking in the least. So Transformers, Power Rangers, and Gargoyles got thrown straight out the window, I'm afraid."
"Oh, well I can fix that. Here, I'll pull up the first episode…"

"No," said Ash, sounding surprisingly adamant.

"Why not?" asked Sai, in confusion.

"If we leave this dimension," said Ash, "I'll consider it. Until then, such a thing strikes me as creepy, invasive, and voyeuristic."

"…but you already know a great deal about this universe," Sai pointed out. "And about these people in particular. And the only reason you don't already know is a simple quirk of chance. What's the harm in looking at it now?"

Ash's expression took on an air of disgust. "Because if I do it with that motivation, it will become part of the legacy of choice which has shaped my soul up until this point. And I don't want to be the kind of person who makes choices like that."

"But no one will know."

"The cliché answer would be, 'I'd know,' but that's not it. It's not just that I'd 'know,' it's that I'd be. I'd be the kind of person who made a choice that I consider personally repulsive merely because it would not negatively affect my reputation. And that does not appeal to me in the least."

"Well, I'm glad you see it that way," said Sai, still wrong-footed, "because I'm definitely going to watch it. There's no point whatsoever in ignoring potentially-useful information."

She put in headphones, but Ash still rose from her seat. "I'll be in our quarters," she said.

Sai nodded, distractedly. "See you later."

Two days later, Sai dragged Ash to the holodeck, where the kids were running an entertainment program, while also watching their caretakers.

"David Xanatos should not have confessed to us," Sai informed Ash, Clara Hart's pupils blown wide in shock.

"Why not?" asked Ash, Muscovite's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"It was out of character," said Sai. "We don't know him, and we're nowhere near charismatic enough to inspire that kind of confidence in another person… especially that other person."

"Excuse you," said Ash, obviously offended. "I'm plenty charismatic."

"What, really?" said Sai, in disbelief. "I mean, the two of us care about a great deal, but I'd never thought that either of us put any stock into being likable. If I wanted people to like me I'd wear a shirt. And you'd probably stop insulting everyone who has even slightly different taste in media than you do."

Ash deflated. "Hurtful… but true. So what's your explanation?"
"It's not an explanation so much as... a fear. I'm worried we might be Mary Sues."

"Okay?" said Ash, thinking that answered absolutely nothing.

"Seriously, Ash?" said Sai, in a voice of scornful disappointment. "We're in a Star Trek Universe, and you still haven't read 'A Trekkie's Tale'?"

"You have, quite literally, recommended millions of words of fanfic, which you say I quote-unquote 'have to read','" Ash pointed out. "It's far from my first priority."

"Fine, summary it is then." Sai cleared her throat. "A Mary Sue is an idealized author avatar, dropped into canon with little to no justification, given godlike powers and the unquestioned admiration of all the writer's favorite characters, regardless of merit."

"And you think that the only way people could like us... is if we were reality-warping abominations magically forcing people to like us?" said Ash, the very picture of skepticism.

"What do you think is more likely?" said Sai, in an uneasy voice. "That our 'charming personalities' have finally gained us our due acclaim and confidence? Or that something more sinister is going on?"

Ash hummed in thought as she considered the matter. "I'd view it more as a positive reflection on them than a negative one on us," she said. "That is, they're more polite than most people we've encountered simply because they are kinder and more gracious on average than people from the societies we grew up in. It's not that we're suddenly fantastic people by the standards of this culture, it's just that they're neglecting to comment on our lack of courtesy and general insufferability. At any rate, I find it hard to believe we could be doing something so awful without even realizing it."

"I once thought so, too," said Sai, her eyes as flat and lifeless as Ash had ever seen them, "and then I realized that Gems weren't the only sentient race in the universe."

"...computer," said the voice of Captain Solok, "Pause recording."

The Officers of the T'Kumbra, the Manhattan, and Spock were having their weekly meeting in the T'Kumbra's conference room.

"Science Officer Xanatos," said Solok. "Is there any particular reason that you neglected to simply tell us your species, when you clearly intended for us to find out?"

"Why Captain Solok, whatever do you mean?" asked the human masquerading as a Vulcan, "Surely, you're not referring to information that was obtained while aiding your crew with their investigation? I was assured that all such information would be treated with the utmost discretion and classification."

"...I see," said Captain Solok. "In that case, while I realize that you are Vulcan, and not at all human, would you, Lieutenant Fox, Officers Maza and Bluestone, and Officer Tom be willing to offer advice on dealing with the human empire?"

"Certainly captain," said Xanatos. "We'd be delighted."

"What about those two?" asked L'Vor. "Should we tell them that they are not these so-called 'Mary Sues'?"

"I would recommend against it," said Spock. "In fact, I would encourage all members of the
Manhattan and T'Kumbra to continue to behave towards them in a friendly manner, and to grant any reasonable requests they may make of you."

"For what purpose?" asked Solok.

"Why, to determine their motives, of course," said Spock. "After all, if a person believes themselves in possession of mind control powers… their actions will be most indicative of their true character, will they not?"

"Not of Ash Hughes, most likely," said Science Officer Sarissa. "As she has been shown to possess cultural inhibitions which run counter to such a test. But it may provide us more data on Saino Moore."

"So be it," said Captain Solok. "While I cannot speak for the Manhattan, I will support such a course of action by my officers, should they wish to pursue it. On a completely voluntary basis, of course. Personnel dismissed."
Chapter 18

Four months later:

Ash advanced her king's pawn two spaces.

Sai countered with her queen's pawn, placing it obliquely to Ash's piece.

Ash then moved diagonally, taking Sai's pawn for her own.

Sai's queen shot forward and took Ash's pawn, accepting the implicitly-offered trade.

Ash hopped her queen's knight over the front row of pawns, threatening Sai's queen in a manner not easily reciprocated.

"Is there any particular reason why you neglect to utilize the other levels of the chessboard?" asked Diaspore, as she and the other kids watched the match.

"Is there any particular reason why anyone would play 3D chess, unless it was to be a pretentious asshole?" answered Sai, who then winced as Ash kicked her under the table.

"Neither of us particularly enjoy chess," Sai went on, this time in a slightly-more serious manner. "However, it provides the illusion of social interaction, allowing us to hide in the corner, so long as we appear sufficiently engrossed in our game."

"Or someone's game at least," said Ash, noticing their interest. "You guys wanna give it a go?"

"I would enjoy that," said Dionysus. "Diaspore, a game?"

"Certainly," she answered.

Ash and Sai obligingly returned the pieces to their starting positions and surrendered their chairs, moving to stand with Mesolite and Athena, joining the 'helpful advice' squad.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how one looked at it) Diaspore and Dionysus were much better chess players than Ash and Sai, and a small crowd soon formed around their table.

…with several outstanding requests to play the winners of the next few matches.

Ash and Sai exchanged uncomfortable glances, but stayed where they were. What kind of parents would they be if they ran off in the middle of their kids' big game?

Ash, at least, seemed more or less willing to go with the flow, and was engaged in conversation with a cyberpunk-looking android about what a fine thing it was that people of the twenty-fourth century had, 'learned to be delighted with what we are,' whatever that was supposed to mean.

Sai folded her arms and leaned against Athena for support, trying to turn herself invisible through sheer willpower.

Upon seeing the concerned look which Athena was shooting her, Sai recalled that Romulans were touch-telepaths, and hastily straightened up. "Sorry," she said. "I'm fine."

She was still on tenterhooks over the fact that she might be a Mary Sue… but sure, 'fine,' let's go
with that. Wasn't like they'd effortlessly become the center of attention at what was supposed to be a diplomatic function. Wasn't like she had to worry about the morality of her very existence, if she turned out to be a reality-warper or anything like that…

"Excuse me," said a cultured voice, halting her spiral of self-doubt and/or -loathing.

Sai turned.

And stopped.

"Pardon the interruption," continued the being, who Sai recognized immediately from Homestuck, "but your companion requested that I speak with you."

Over his shoulder, Ash gave her a thumbs up and a grin, before returning to her own conversation.

Sai did not roll her eyes, but it was a near thing. Ash had been doing this far too often, introducing her to well-adjusted people that Sai knew from pessimistic media to try and wear her down with sheer idealism. Joke was on her, in this case. There was a perfectly logical explanation for a non-genocidal Troll race, a canonical one, even.

"Saino Moore," she said, nodding in greeting. She couldn't remember if Trolls shook hands, but thought it best to err on the side of caution, especially with this particular individual.

"Equius Zahhak," he returned, validating Sai's assumption. "What may I do for you?"

Sai smile as diplomatically as she could manage. Given the fact that the Troll before her was not sweating profusely, nor had he shattered the wineglass he was holding, she was fairly confident in assuming a pre-Scratch iteration.

"I apologize for Ash," Sai said. "She thinks I could stand to be less cynical, and has been throwing various ambassadors at me in an attempt to convince me that my own dictatorial society constitutes an aberration. Before you it was the Medusans, before them it was the Klingons… but I'm sure Beforus is a very nice planet. There's really no need to—"

Equius Zahhak frowned. "A correction, if you please: the name of our planet is 'Alternia.'"

Sai was brought up short. "...how long ago did your Empress take the throne?"

"Two sweeps ago," he answered, before catching himself. "Ah, a sweep is…"

"Two and one-sixth years," Sai finished, eyes narrowed in consideration. That was a take she hadn't expected.

"Your species contains a variety of blood colors within a single species, correct?" she began. "Could you elaborate on how this affects your planet's laws and socio-economic structure?"

Equius Zahhak blinked. "Yes, of course. Well, to start with…"

This would be a convenient point to reveal that the whole previous sequence had been merely a recorded prelude to a meeting of the T'Kumbra's senior staff… however, despite Sai's paranoia, interest in Ash and Sai had largely dropped off once Captain Solok had realized that the Manhattan's human crew members offered an infinitely more relevant perspective into the human psyche.

And a wealth of intelligence about the inner workings of the Union.
Ash and Sai were still considered oddities, of course, and curiosities worth studying… but they’d dropped a few dozen places on the Federation’s priority list, which was part of the reason the two of them and their ‘kids’ had been sent off to an interspecies friendship conference without so much as an escort. It was both gesture of ridiculous permissiveness, in keeping with Solok’s policy of accommodation, and a way of keeping them out from underfoot for a few weeks, while they worked out plans for making peace with the humans and their empire.

Indeed, when Xanatos suggested that they consult Ash and Sai on certain aspect of the peacemaking efforts, it was almost an afterthought.

Not that the two of them had noticed, preoccupied with their own affairs as they were.

Specifically, with the kids.

Later, after the diplomatic function had wound down enough that only a few people were left, Ash and Sai were once again playing chess, as a backdrop for their argument over unrelated matters.

"If we’ve brainwashed everyone else…” Ash began, "then what about the kids?"

Sai thought it over. "Well, to answer that we first have to consider the question, ‘to what extent is any child brainwashed by their parents?’…”

"Seriously, Sai?” said Ash, looking annoyed.

"What?” said Sai, completely unrepentant. "It's a weird relationship. Unequal by default, power imbalance, need I go on?"

"I'm… not sure where to start with that," Ash admitted, "but… no. Just no."

"Well what do you guys think?” said Sai, turning to the Romulans. "Do you feel brainwashed? Did you feel different when we were gone? Do you want us to leave again?"

Diaspore shrugged. "You do not need to remain for our sakes."

"We know,” said Ash, "but… well, not to sound desperate, but we don't really have anywhere else to go."

"Nowhere positive, anyway,” said Sai, "There's always running away. But we're fairly certain that it's already too late for that."

"We can't guarantee we'll be around for any length of time,” said Ash, "But we're perfectly willing to spend what time we have left here."

"If you change your minds at any time,” said Athena, "we'll understand."

"We can't promise we won't,” said Ash, looking pained, "… but we're not planning to."

"If we're caught tomorrow,” said Sai, "we want you to know that we're proud of you and we love you."

Ash shot her a dirty look. "Even if we're not caught tomorrow, we want you to know that."

"...but we do realize that such sentiments are counterproductive to those trying to fit in with the Vulcans,” Sai continued, "so we'll keep them to ourselves in public."
"We… we aren't ashamed of you," said Dionysus.

Sai gave them a look.

"We aren't… very ashamed of you… but, thank you," said Mesolite.

Meanwhile, others were planning:

"Right," said Saavik, attempting to recap the meeting in a succinct fashion. "The 'Family' is returning to the T'Kumbra. Yellow alert status will be resumed once they board."

"What have they done to warrant such suspicion?" asked Spock.

"The fixation of the Romulan children on their two caretakers remains… troubling," said Sarissa. "You recall how we said that the ship lacked the resources to hatch them?"

"Yes," said Spock

"The… most benevolent scenario we can put together for their motives still involves substantial suffering on both their parts," Sarissa continued. "We still lack motives for them, beyond the obvious cover story they've given about being on the run from the gods, and bound and determined to run up as much positive and negative karma at they can before being recaptured. Searching after positive Karma may explain Ash Hughes fixation with… 'parenting' the young Romulans, but not so for Saino Moore. In addition, our research on humans indicated that they are driven by emotions, and that they have a great deal of difficulty empathizing with species sufficiently different from their own physicality. And the wiped security logs of the ship remain suspicious. Even if their motives are positive… they are certainly hiding things and keeping secrets."

"Transporter room to Solok," came a message from the intercom.

"Solok here," he answered.

"Captain, there's been an… incident, in transporter room two."

"On my way," said Solok.

"That doesn't sound good," noted L'Vor.

"I imagine that it won't be," said Solok, as he rose from his seat and left the room.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Violence warning for this chapter, I guess? Not traumatic for the characters, but when I described the protagonists as 'undead' you can rest assured that I meant it.

Celadon came into being on a transporter pad, and tried to recall the meaning for her existence.

Were Sai and Ash in danger? Were they bored? What was her motivation here?

Celadon didn't know.

For the first time in her life… she had no idea what she was supposed to do.

"What the…” began Sai off to her right side.

"Celadon?” said Ash, to her left.

Were they meditating? That should be the only way she and her components could meet face-to-face.

But no, this wasn't her mindscape—the kids were there, for one thing—and this was very clearly the interior of a starship, so why…?

"This,” said the Vulcan transporter technician, "Is unexpected."

Several batteries of tests later:

"The transporter malfunction appears to have combined the DNA of Saino Moore and Ash Hughes into a third individual, one whose DNA is identical to that of the 'Fusion,' Celadon,” said Chief Medical Officer T'Pal.

"Memories seem to all be here too,” said Celadon, to the audience of Captain Solok, Security Chief T'rel, First Officer Saavik, Science Officer Sarissa, and CMO T'Pal. "Although, I suppose I wouldn't know if any were missing."

She turned to Ash and Sai.

"What happens now if you two fuse?"

They did. Celadon disappeared from where she was standing, and reappeared where Ash and Sai had been dancing.

"Interesting,” said Celadon. She ‘split up’, though all this caused was for Ash and Sai to reappear. Celadon stayed where she was. Though the Romulans seemed to sense something amiss.

"You just switched again,” observed Athena.
"Right," said Cultivar Muscovite. "I'm Sai again. Probably best to keep things as straightforward as possible… at least under the current circumstances."

"Is there any particular reason why the two of you switch bodies?" asked Sarissa.

Ash and Sai glanced at each other, then realized there was a third person who should be considered and both met Celadon's eyes.

"Personal reasons," said all three of them.

"Can you fuse with us?" Ash asked Celadon, obviously looking to change the subject.

They tried, it worked.

"Can you fuse with just one of us?" asked Sai.

"How would that even work?" grumbled Celadon. But she tried, and it worked. Or rather, there was a flash of light and Sai was gone. Celadon was still there, as was Ash.

"This is so weird," said Ash.

Celadon and Sai split up.

Celadon fused with Ash, then unfused.

Then Celadon fused with Sai again. Then Celadon/Sai fused with Ash.

Then they tried again in reverse order. Celadon fused with Ash then Sai. The order made no difference.

"Celadon, what number am I thinking of?"

"Forty-five? And… Ash, you're thinking of eighty-one." It appeared that their minds were still linked, though only one way. Ash and Sai couldn't tell what Celadon was thinking. It appeared that some aspects of their abilities were not reciprocal.

"What if one of us dies?" asked Sai. She eyed the Security Chief speculatively. "What do phasers on 'kill' do in this universe?"

"Vaporize you," said Ash.

"Useless," muttered Sai. She pulled a grenade out of her cheek and gave it to Ash. "What do you think?" she said, moving to stand behind her.

Ash crushed the grenade and inhaled the fragments. "Why not?" she said.

"Celadon?" asked Sai.

The Fusion shrugged. "Worth a shot."

Without another word, Sai seized Ash's head and twisted. Captain Solok and T'Pal exchanged a look.

There was a horrible cracking sound, and Ash's dead body fell to the ground.

Sai looked at Celadon, who remained unfazed at her component's death.
Sai knelt down to Ash. Fragments of muscovite spread over her skin, then Ash took a deep, shuddering breath and opened her eyes.

"Anything?" Ash asked.

"Nope," said Sai, handing her two more grenades. "Now you do me."

When Ash looked confusedly at the two grenades, Sai coughed awkwardly. "Your right then your left," she clarified.

Ash threw the first grenade and Sai grimaced, collapsing into a shapeless mass of glitter.

Ash looked to Celadon, who shrugged.

Ash threw the second grenade, which restored Sai to her former glory.

In synchronicity, Ash and Sai turned to Celadon. "What about both?"

Celadon hummed, then stepped forward.

In a second, Clara Hart had been stabbed through the heart, courtesy of a shapeshifted hand in order to make up for the height difference, and half of Muscovite's chest had been crushed.

The two of them wheezed a second, before going limp.

Celadon checked Ash's pulse and Sai's gem, before straightening and examining her own arms in curiosity.

"Greater than the sum of my parts indeed," she mused.

Celadon turned and forced a morphing hand into Ash's chest wound. A moment later, she removed it and turned to Sai.

Ash's wound was healed. Even her shirt was fixed, though the bloodstains remained.

Celadon held Sai's gem for a few seconds, before it lit up and floated, as Sai reformed.

Next, the two of them turned on Celadon, who nodded.

She died and was resurrected just as easily as the other two.

The three of them speculated for a few seconds, before being interrupted.

"How were you able to return from a state of death?" asked T'Pal.

The three paused, having mostly forgotten that the others were even there.

"Because we're already dead," said Sai.

"Normally, death severs the connection between soul and body, whisking the soul away to their destined afterlife," said Ash. "But the gods of our afterlife sent us back, to learn some lesson or other, so that doesn't happen to us. They reanimated our bodies to do it, so destroying our bodies forces us to go back, or linger as spirits. If an outside force heals our bodies, our souls can rejoin them with minimal effort."

"How long have you possessed this ability?" asked Solok.
"Since long before we ever found this universe," said Celadon, dismissively.

"Bridge to Solok," sounded a voice over the intercom.

"Solok here," he answered.

"The Union Vessel has just appeared on scanners."

"On my way," said Solok.

Solok and Saavik exited the medical bay and entered a turbolift.

"That explains the how," said Solok. "Inadequate resources are irrelevant when death is a slap on the wrist."

"But not the why," said Saavik. "The missing security logs remain a concern."

The turbolift reached the bridge.

"But we have other concerns at the moment," she continued.

"Quite," agreed Solok.

According to hearsay, the Federation was entering into 'Peace Talks' with some intimidating Empire or other, but Sai and Ash hadn't concerned themselves much with it. Especially not since the kids had finished their education (scarily sharp Romulan intellect along with 24th century school systems will do that). These days, the two of them spent more time following the kids around than the reverse. And, as the four of them were usually off in different parts of the ship, Ash and Sai shadowed a different kid each day, meaning that, while they were still part of their kids' lives, they were much less omnipresent than they had been. They could only think of this as a good thing. Celadon agreed, and usually spent the day off pursuing her own interests, as well.

Today, however, Mesolite and Athena were working out at the gym together, which meant that Ash and Sai were hanging out for the first time in perhaps a week. They were back to their 'default' state of Ash being Muscovite and Sai being Clara, but that was honestly almost normal, by this point.

Of the four kids, Mesolite was the only one who'd shown any interest in joining Starfleet, and was currently training for the Academy's Entrance Examination. Athena was helping.

However, during Athena and Mesolite's eighth lap around the track (Ash and Sai's third lap in the same amount of time) a tour group entered the gym.

A tour group containing humans. One of whom Ash recognized.

"The Orville Delegation," an Ensign informed the two of them, seeing their confused expressions. The two of them looked, and saw the man at the front of the group inch his way past a Medusan, with an offhand, "Pardon me, tentacles."

"They're rather important diplomats," added the Ensign, his face carefully blank.

"Thank you," said Ash, nodding to the Vulcan, as they made their way to Mesolite and Athena, while the human guy made a 'Beauty and the Beast' joke about Captain Goliath and Officer Maza from the Manhattan before moving on. The two of them reached the Romulans just in time to hear,
"Whoa, back it up, pal. Not interested in a face full of alien wing wong," directed at Athena and Mesolite.

Ash placed a hand on Athena's wrist, and Sai grabbed Mesolite's forearm, letting the kids know that they were absolutely ready to throw down and rip the guy to shreds.

In response, the Romulans carefully clasped their caretakers' hands, conveying that they didn't want a scene on their behalf, and replying to the insult with something polite.

The human could sense the tone, however, and attempted to awkwardly extricate himself from the situation. "Well, I'm just gonna head back to the shuttle," he said. "You all have a great day."

"Whatever you say, Mary Sue," said Sai, mildly.

"It's 'Mercer','" said the man, but he didn't appear truly bothered by the mispronunciation.

"Err?" said Ash, brightly, "Merr merr-sterrk! Gerrd-berr, Cerrp-terrn Merr-Serr."

After giving them an odd look, the man returned to his group and, the Orville contingent walked away.

The party relaxed somewhat and broke off skin contact. Ash burst into giggles.

"Ash," said Sai, trying to smother her grin with a frown. "You know that meme has ableist connotations—"

Ash shrugged. "Nobody's perfect. Especially not me."

"What were you attempting to convey?" asked the Ensign from earlier.

"Oh?" repeated Ash, "'My mistake! Goodbye, Captain Mary Sue.'"

"But with that particular speech pattern," Athena observed, "'Mary Sue' and 'Mercer' are indistinguishable."

"You're going to slurr your speech around them in the future, I presume?" said Mesolite.

"You know me so well," said Ash.

"Elitist bastards," said Sai. "'Ooh, look at me, I'm too good to use transporters like a normal person'—"

"The Union doesn't possess transporter technology," pointed out Mesolite.

"They have a bigger special effects budget and they're flaunting it," said Ash.

"What?" said Sai.

Ash put her head in her hands. "The Original Series introduced the transporter as a way to save money," Ash continued. "Cheap special effects and 'boom' instant transition."

"I don't think that applies in this situation," said Sai.

"I know you want a Watsonian explanation," said Ash, "but Sai you should know by now that I am made of Doyle. And thinking of The Orville as a self-insert fanfic of Star Trek explains so, so much."
"Such as?" asked The ensign.

"The self-centered nature of the captain, for one thing," said Ash. "His name is practically 'Mary Sue.' And his crew falls all over themselves to accommodate him and stroke his ego. Particularly the First Officer. Rumor mill says that she's an ex-wife who cheated on him… a fact that he brings up at every possible opportunity to garner sympathy for himself and make his officers uncomfortable. Believe me, I can spot another Martyr when I see one," said Ash. "And that guy?" she continued, "Classic case."

Ash paused, as though something had just occurred to her.

"It would also explain all the atheism," said Ash, in a considering tone of voice.

At their curious looks, she went on. "While there is much religion in Star Trek, Christianity is left out, leading to the conclusion that it died out as a religion, simply due to the fact that no one seems to practice it. This is just… extrapolation from the source material. Which, I mean, I can kinda see."

"Seems kind of an oversight, if the show was optimistic," said Sai. "On Earth, practitioners of religion outnumber practitioners of atheism, correct?"

"Yeah, and the Gempire's the opposite, right?" said Ash. "The show didn't seem to mention anything…"


"You're a what?" said Ash, taken aback.

"I'm a Wizard, Harry," said Sai, with a wry smile.

"Sai, seriously," said Ash, sweeping a hand dismissively. "You're from a space empire. You were hundreds of years old when you set foot on earth. How can you be Christian?"

Sai shrugged. "As religions go, I'll admit its adherents can be somewhat… problematic, but nonetheless, it is my faith."

"Why?" asked Ash.

Sai hesitated. "At the time and place I landed on Earth, it was the major religion. And it… resonated, with things I'd always thought but never been quite sure how to voice. I was on Earth for more than a thousand years, Ash. I wasn't about to risk human lives by befriending people, so I needed something to keep me sane. And it worked."

Ash looked troubled "I… just don't see why you would choose to believe something without proof. It's entirely possible that there is a god or greater being of some sort… but if so, then it clearly values freedom of choice more than it values belief, even belief in itself. I take my choices very seriously, because I take myself very seriously, but beyond that… I don't see it."

"In my experience," said Sai, placing a consoling hand on Ash shoulder, "belief has been a force of good. Disbelief can be useful in destroying harmful beliefs, but disbelief for the sake of disbelief? I couldn't sustain it. Though… I do admire your conviction, Ash."

Ash smiled softly. "Sai, if you're Christian, then you absolutely have to read C.S. Lewis. 'There's nothing wrong with loving something just because it's yours.' Used to explain patriotism, but, still. I'm glad that your faith brings you comfort."
That night, Ash stayed up late reading. Sai and Celadon were off with the kids, doing something or other that Ash had opted out of.

Eventually, she decided that she needed to brush her teeth.

Ash turned off her Padd, rose from her bed, and promptly stepped in a slice of pie.

"Oh no," she said, her eyes going wide with horror.

Cut to black.
That night, Deep Space Six was playing host to the Betazed Symphony Orchestra: a group lauded for their innovative take on the symphonic art form. Unlike a traditional orchestra, each performance by this group was completely unique. The majority of its members were psychic, and, while they always started out with a prearranged piece, they shaped most of the performance in real time based on the thoughts, associations, and reactions of the audience to that initial musical refrain and its subsequent alterations.

Ash, having predicted that Sai would spend the whole night think-screaming memes, had decided to skip that particular performance. Celadon, who knew for a fact that Sai was planning exactly that, had shown up early and planned on staying late.

Sai, on the other hand, was more nervous than those who knew her might suspect. For Sai, this was not to be a night of revelry, but of revelation. Tonight, she would make her first serious experiment on the extent of her influence on others. As of yet, her tentative forays into making requests of the T'Kumbra and Manhattan crew-members had yielded no conclusive results, though Sai had yet to be refused anything she'd asked for. That, in itself, was worrying.

And, if she was going to push things any further, to attempt outright manipulation, then Sai had decided that there wasn't a better target to be had than telepaths. They'd be forewarned, if they even noticed her at all. And, at any rate, the audience was *encouraged* to try and influence the musicians. It wasn't as though she knew any of these people, and not like she'd see any of them again after tonight.

If Sai was able to shape the performance to a degree disproportionate with what might be expected, given that she was only one among an audience of hundreds, then that would be indirect evidence for Mary Suedom. Or 'one more nail in the coffin' might be a more accurate reflection of Sai's mental state, come to think of it.

Even so, Sai had decided that this wasn't an occasion for '4 Non Blondes' or 'Bohemian Rhapsody.' Instead, she was opting for something slightly more restrained: tonight, Sai would spend the entire evening meditating on 'Pachelbel's Canon in D.'

If it worked, it might simply be due to the catchiness of the song.

If it worked, it was classical music anyway, so it shouldn't affect the performance unduly.

Sai was kind of biasing towards the idea that was going to work. If it didn't, she wasn't sure what she would do.

Besides collapse in complete and utter relief, of course.

Fifteen minutes into the performance, and she'd only heard a few strains of anything resembling...
Pachelbel's four famous chords, mostly from a theremin player who kept shooting Sai dirty looks.

'So far so good,' she thought, tentatively relieved.

That was when the door had whooshed open.

Light streamed into the darkened auditorium; people turned around in their seats to see what was happening.

...and in walked all the Boss Monsters from Undertale.

The music broke into dissonance and then screeched to a halt at their entrance.

No one could blame the musicians, for these beings truly were a sight unlike any other.

Undyne wore full plate-armor, while Alphys hid in her shadow and held a terracotta pot containing Flowey. Toriel cradled a fireball, and Frisk walked beside her. Mettaton wheeled along in his invulnerable box form. Papyrus wore the uniform of the royal guard—Asgore wore full war regalia. And, at the front of the crowd, Sans led them, his eye-socket glowing an unholy blue.

This was bad, Sai decided. Anything that could motivate Sans the Skeleton to take initiative, let alone lead the charge, had to be severe.

And, unless this was all a massive coincidence, they had to be here for her.

No, she realized, horror hitting her like a sluice of ice-water down her back, not just for her. If they were here for her, then that meant that they'd already gotten Ash.

Ash who was in her body.

Ash who they had to have thought was Sai.

"Where's Muscovite's body?" she demanded, practically snarling in hostility.

She needed to keep the gem safe at all costs, or else Ash—

"Gaster Blasters," said Sans, gruffly. "There wasn't anything left."

Sai swallowed. As soon as she had confirmed it (via a discreet glance at Celadon) she announced, "I'm out. Mezzy, phase me."

Obligingly, Mesolite tossed over a phaser.

Sai set the weapon to 'kill.'

...then shot herself in the chest, vaporizing without another word.

"Where did she go?" asked Papyrus, in puzzlement.

Celadon hadn't been noticed yet, and so she stepped forward.

"Right here," she answered.

She had to keep their attention, so that they wouldn't feel the need to escalate things. No matter badly she wanted to metaphorically fall apart, she couldn't risk losing tempo, not if it meant an even
slightly-higher risk of any bystanders getting hurt.

"You," growled Undyne, obviously recognizing the Fusion from their previous encounters. "Who… what are you?"

She smirked. "Celadon," she answered. "I am the amalgamate of Clara Hart and Cultivar Muscovite. Anything that you wish to say to them, you should say to me."

"A-amalgamates don't separate and recombine," Alphys pointed out.

"True. We don't call ourselves an 'Amalgamate';" Celadon allowed. "The proper term is 'Fusion.' I use the other term purely to make things clearer from your perspective."

"We wish to speak with Clara," said Toriel. "Separate."

"No," said Celadon, with a disdainful scoff. "If I do that, you'll just kill Muscovite again. She is half of me, and I don't want to lose her. However, if you wish to speak with Clara…"

Celadon couldn't actually channel Ash... but she could imitate Ash's mannerisms well enough to fool anyone besides her components. Celadon's features changed, becoming softer.

"Hey, guys," she said, with a faint smile. "It's good to see you again."

"Ash, what was that?" said Sans, "Why did you shoot yourself?"

"I had to save Muscovite," said Celadon, still using Ash's voice.

"Why?" said Mettaton.

"Because she's my friend," Celadon stated.

"She killed all of us and laughed about it!" said Undyne.

"…she's still my friend," said Celadon.

"We could get you away from her," said Alphys. "W-we could save you."

Celadon sneered. "I don't need to be 'saved' from Muscovite. And, frankly, even if I did, I'm not sure I'd trust you to do it."

"What?" said Frisk.

"Don't get me wrong, you were all great characters," Celadon-as-Ash said, with a shrug, "but I'm not sure I'd like any of you guys in real life. Whereas Muscovite and I have been friends for more than seventeen years. I know that I can trust her."

"She's a murderer," said Undyne.

"And you killed children," returned Celadon, cold and imperious.

"In the game," said Sans.

"The game is all I know you from," said Celadon. "That's… not enough to say that you know someone. We thought it was a game, so our intentions weren't bad. And you're all still alive, so there were no lasting consequences. Why did you track us down? Why can't you just leave us alone? What's even the point of all this?"
Her voice cracked slightly on the last sentence, and Celadon tightened the steel bands around her composure. She needed to remain in control of the situation. The safety of all these people was depending on her actions, if only indirectly.

"Attention, intruders," said Security Chief T'Rel. "You are trespassing on a Federation Starbase. State your purpose."

Celadon started in surprise and looked to see a full security team aiming phasers at the group of them. Though not, interestingly enough, at Celadon.

The standoff stretched on as the two sides evaluated each other. Something in the Security Chief's expression must have been convincing, because Sans eventually broke off eye contact with a jerk of his head.

"...we were just leaving," said Sans, flashing a hand signal at the rest of the Boss Monsters. With that, he walked sideways through space, disappearing. The rest followed, vanishing as quickly as they'd appeared.

Captain Solok spoke a few minutes with T'Rel before turning to Celadon. "Do you require medical attention?"

"You," said Celadon, shell-shocked. "You didn't have to do that."

"They were causing a disturbance on the ship and creating emotional instability in one granted sanctuary," said Solok, blandly as anyone discussing the weather.

Celadon's expression turned brittle, then broken. Tears slipped from her eyes, and she began to sob.

"Celadon?" asked T'Rel, using her name for the first time she could remember.

"Sorry. It's just... this is it."

"This is what?" asked Solok.

"You," she said to the T'Kumbra's crew, scrubbing a hand across her face in an effort to wipe away the tears. "Protecting us even after we've been obnoxious and freeloaded off you for the better part of a year. This is what would have convinced Sai that you're good, and convinced Ash that you're kind. And neither—neither of them are here to see it."

"Where are your components?" asked Sarissa.

"They're... fine," said Celadon, giving a reassuring grin. "But I think they'll be going on the run for awhile, until the heat dies down. It's unlikely that—"

At that moment, Celadon's words were cut through by the sound of a single, solitary theremin, playing all alone upon the stage.

Celadon looked over, and saw the musician giving her a pointed look.

She listened closer to the melody. It seemed familiar, but where had—?

Oh. That was the song that Sai had used as a mantra, in the final moments before she'd shot herself. Sai never had possessed the slightest amount of good taste, Celadon reflected, tears starting up afresh. From her Rainbow Pimp Gear personal appearance to her irony-meta-pun laden fanfiction, Sai was a Gem who knew what she liked and who wasn't about to let the laws of copyright or
fashion stand in her way of obtaining it.

The theremin was incapable of words, but it sounded enough like a voice that Celadon felt she could almost hear the lyrics of the song as it played:

"You're not being honest, really.

You're really not and ought to be.

Take an honest look at yourself.

Try a little honesty."

After a few seconds to pull herself together, Celadon sighed, and met the gazes of the kids. "Ash and Sai wanted to say, 'Goodbye,'" she informed them.

"They didn't fuse with you?" asked Athena.

"No, they're dead," answered Celadon, regretfully. "Their bodies are gone. And I can't split apart to bring them back. I wasn't ever able to do that. They're undead enough that they could bounce back from this easily enough but... unfortunately, I can tell that neither of them is going to come back of their own free will."

"Why not?" asked Diaspore.

"They're trying to protect me," said Celadon, her tone one of reluctance.

"To protect you," repeated Dionysus.

"This wasn't supposed to happen!" Celadon exclaimed. "I was supposed to be a convenience for them. A loophole to exploit! An Ace in the Hole! Not some—some burden keeping them trapped and helpless!"

"How is their decision your fault?" asked Mesolite.

"Their best chance at escape is by fusing into me and running to a new dimension," said Celadon. "But neither of them will do that because I have a body of my own now. They're hoping I'll stay with you guys. That I'll forget them and be happy. They're even worrying over the fact that I can read their minds and resolving to do their best to be happy in a literal hellscape! Their minds are cut off from mine now; that's completely unnecessary, but... would you like to see? To see my last memories of them?"

"Why would you show us?" asked T'Rel.

Celadon's eyes grew distant. "Deep inside of everyone, there's a hot ball of shame: guilt, regret, anxiety, fears we dare not name."

"What?"

Celadon turned her head to the side. "It's what Ash would have wanted. And it's what Sai deserves."

And then her gem lit up, projecting a memory onto the wall of the auditorium.

Within an empty, cavernous hallway, Ash and Sai reunited.
They couldn't go back to where they'd come from, of course, because Garnet had assured them that if they returned to the afterlife, they'd be caught. And the both of them reasoned that it was better for two to be caught than three.

This was the same reason why they couldn't fuse into Celadon and escape.

Sai found Ash, but as soon as she did, her courage deserted her, and she slumped against a pillar, shaking with fear.

"Sai?" said Ash.

Sai twitched, but didn't go to Ash. They both knew if they fused they'd just drag Celadon down with them. And neither of them could bear to be responsible for such a thing.

"I'm afraid," said Sai.

"That's alright," said Ash.

"I can't do this," said Sai, her voice verging on desperation.

"We can," Ash assured her.

"No, I—I can't," said Sai. "The first time, I had no idea what was happening, but—to know, and to do it anyway..."

"This cold-blooded walk to his own destruction would require a different sort of courage," said Ash, barely aware of the words, even as she spoke them, her throat tight in realization.

"What?" said Sai, her panic giving way, briefly, to confusion.

Ash had never seen Sai like this. Sai was the one who'd lived for thousands of years, Sai was the one who was social and worldly and always composed in the face of danger.

…except, it seemed, in the face of death. In this manner, Ash held the advantage. After all, as a Gem, Sai could reasonably expect immortality, so long as she was careful. Whereas, Ash had never been more than scant decades away from death in her whole existence.

Well, Sai had always helped Ash whenever she could. How could Ash do anything less, here and now?

"Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," said Ash, citing her source. "I'm afraid most of my wisdom comes in quote form, but, well, some of them are pretty good, I think."

As Sai sat, paralyzed, Ash continued her recitations. She went through the whole of "A Psalm of Life" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Emancipation" by Emily Dickinson, "Israfel" by Edgar Allan Poe, "We Wear The Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar… but "Solitude" by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, seemed to be what finally got through to her.

"Feast and your halls are crowded," recited Ash.

"Fast and the world goes by.

Succeed and give and it helps you to live

But no man can help you to die."
There is room in the halls of Pleasure

For a long and lordly train

But one by one

We must all file on

Through the narrow aisles of pain.”

Sai lowered her head and began to cry.

Ash let her mind drift back to other memories. She had the shape of something that could help Sai, but what book had it come from? Venus and temptation and—ah, Lewis again. Now Sai would never get to read his writings, which was such a stupid tragedy…

Ash cleared her throat.

"Something happened to him which had happened only twice before in his life:" she began, her cadence clearly that of quotation. "Ransom knew that, as he was now, he was mentally incapable of accomplishing the task set before him. It wasn't a matter of effort or skill, but rather of anathema. He couldn't take that dangerous job during the last war; he couldn't go back to London to confess his humiliating mistake; and he most certainly couldn't fight the Un-Man of his own free will.”

Even now, Ash remained painfully aware that she couldn't touch Sai, couldn't offer even the physical reassurance of a hug, because she also needed to protect Celadon. Still, she maintained the entirety of her focus on Sai, attempting to convey her support through eye-contact and body language, as well as through tone of voice.

"…but then, just as before," Ash continued, "'without any apparent movement of his will—as dry and objective as the reading of a dial—there had arisen before him, with perfect certitude, a resolution.'" Ash stopped herself from reaching for Sai's hand.

"By this time tomorrow," said Ash, with an air of finality, "'you will have done the impossible.'"

Sai took a great shuddering breath and hauled herself to her feet.

"C.S. Lewis," said Ash, softly. "Perelandra."

Sai's breathing had evened out, so Ash remained silent, waiting until she felt ready to speak.

A change came over Sai, then: as abrupt and unnatural a change as Ash had ever seen, and she realized that Sai must have finally regained enough self-control to switch her emotions off. That couldn't be healthy for her, long term, but then again who was Ash to talk?

"…let's go," said Sai in a cold, flat voice.

Ash nodded, and side by side—though with three feet between them—the two of them walked off, unresisting, to face judgment.

Chapter End Notes
"The Skeleton Song" by The Mighty Mighty Bosstones.

"Shine a Light" from Heathers the Musical.
Chapter Notes

Cliff Hanger! Hanging from a cliff! And that's why he's called 'Cliff Hanger'!

(Cant... hold... on... much... longer...!) See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a good thing that they'd already pulled themselves together enough to move forward, because Sai and Ash were soon given no choice in the matter.

Before they'd gone through more than a few hallways, they'd been spotted by a group of what seemed to be soldiers. After tying their arms together behind their backs, the guards had frog-marched the two of them to the room with the scales, before throwing them face-first onto the floor.

"Well," said Ma'at. "If it isn't our two problem children. Finally died again, I take it?"

Ash nodded. Sai said nothing.

"All right," said the Goddess, with a sigh, "let's do this again."

She opened a chest and drew forth two hearts. Or, rather, Ash's heart and Sai's gem.

She placed Ash's heart on the scales opposite the Feather of Truth.

It barely had any weight at all.

She removed it and replaced it with Sai's gem.

It sank like a rock.

"You..." her eyebrows knit in confusion, "...you're even more unbalanced than the first time."

"There's just no helping some people," said Anubis, whose name Ash now knew due to previous research.

"You haven't even been alive as long as you were the first time," Ma'at said to Ash.

"And you," she said, turning to Sai, "it's been barely a fraction of your previous lifespan." She shook her head in disbelief. "How did this happen. What did you do?"

Ash shrugged. "Our best."

Ma'at held a heart in each of her hands and closed her eyes in concentration.

"Is that really necessary?" asked Thoth.

"They made each other worse! This shouldn't have happened! We need to know why," said Ma'at, without opening her eyes.
Several long minutes ticked by in terse silence, before Ma'at finally opened her eyes.

"They're incapable of change," she announced.

"That's a bold claim to make," said Osiris.

"They're not going to change of their own free will," Ma'at clarified, before returning her attention to the duo before her.

"She," Ma'at began, gesturing with Ash's heart, "is selfish and weak. And she," continued Ma'at, gesturing with Sai's gem, "is weak and selfish. And both of them take pride in their vices."

"Elaborate," said Osiris.

Ma'at sneered at Ash. "You have a pathological need to be the 'main character' of the story. When you lived with the Crystal Gems, you could have warned them of what was coming. Instead, you allowed them to suffer so that you, yourself, could play the hero. Because you were afraid that they wouldn't like you if they knew you were keeping secrets from them. Selfishness, but above all, weakness. Yes, you have done good, but at the cost of compassion."

"You," she said, to Sai, "knowing the stories of others, see them as less than sentient, and refuse to acknowledge their suffering or attempt to relieve it. This is weak, but primarily selfish. You have accomplished your goals and accomplished them efficiently… but at the cost of your own sense of empathy..."

Ash and Sai said nothing. Gods or not, these people were clearly full of shit. Whatever test of character this was, the two weren't about to encourage it. The duo's first priority was to protect Celadon. This could best be accomplished by not giving their judges any further information to work with.

As things went on, and the accusations kept coming, Sai, of course, remained blank. Ash at first looked confused: shouldn't they reveal their hand as to why they were falsely accusing them? The two of them clearly weren't playing their game, so shouldn't they drop it? It, it wasn't like Ma'at actually believed the things she was saying, right? She was a Goddess, surely she—

And then, though she remained silent, Ash's expression turned to dawning revelation, followed by a triumphant, transcendent glee.

'They have no idea what they're talking about!' she realized. 'Just because they're powerful doesn't mean that they're the least bit competent! Nothing they've said has ever necessarily had any amount of authenticity. I might not be a good person! And Sai… Sai might not be a bad one.'

Sai continued listening to their accusations coldly and attentively, and this did not change.

In contrast, as Ash became less mortified, she became almost bored, and the creative parts of her mind kicked into overdrive, immediately thinking of how she could use this for future stories.

After all, being called out for failing to adhere to the One True Moral Code was one thing; being falsely accused of such was another thing entirely. Listening to the charges leveled against them took a back seat to examining her own emotions and listing realizations this situation had brought out that otherwise might never have seen the light of day.

Back on DS6, Celadon was still transferring a delayed stream of consciousness to a viewscreen, as the others watched. It seemed that the 'trial' such as it was, was finally winding down to a close.
"You were given a second chance and you squandered it," said Osiris, onscreen. "We wash our hands of you. Ammit is still... Ammit, but we have other options. Your hearts have been weighed and found wanting. You are no longer our concern."

Neither of her components looked so much as fazed, and Celadon grimaced.

"You absolute morons," she whispered. "Just what are you thinking?"

The screen zoomed in on Clara Hart, on Sai, and the audio faded away to be replaced with Sai’s inner monologue, which consisted mostly of odd fatalistic remarks, but set against the backdrop of the Skeleton song, that was apparently still stuck in her head.

"They let up when they knew they got through.

They knew I'd never be the same.

With little left to say or do

They left as quickly as they came.

The life was scared half out of me.

Some way, Somehow, I survived.

A part of me was proud of me

The day my skeletons arrived."

Celadon sighed, heavily, before moving her focus over to Ash, to Muscovite, to see that her other component was also using music to soothe herself in her final moments. Though Ash's mind reverberated with a smug, self-satisfied undertone that Sai's had distinctly lacked:

"I know you're scared of dying, man, and I am, too.

But just pretending it's not happening isn't gonna see us through.

If we accept that there's an endgame and we haven't got much time

Then in the here and now, well, we can try and do things right.

We'd be our own salvation army and together we'd believe

In all the wondrous things that mere mortals can achieve..."

Celadon's eyes narrowed, but she refrained from comment, once again drawing back to focus on Osiris, who was just finishing his judgment.

"Our highest punishment is destruction of the soul," he said, "However, as this option remains unavailable, we instead give you over to one of our trading partners," he said. "Goodbye."

Then the vision feed abruptly cut off and the image froze.

Celadon sniffed, staring at the frozen image. "This is when I lost them," she said.

She rewound the last few seconds and started it again.

"-instead give you over to one of our trading partners," Osiris said. "Goodbye."
And again.

"Instead give you over to one of our trading partners," Osiris said. "Goodbye."

And drew in a ragged breath.

"I'm going to get them back," Celadon announced, "even if I have to rip myself in half to do it."

She turned back to the kids. Whatever she wound up doing, it was of paramount importance that they discuss it first.

Still, at least the excitement was finally dying down. Celadon needed at least one good, long crying jag before she'd start to feel even remotely like herself again. And that most certainly wasn't going to happen in public.

Diaspore turned and began walking towards the exit. The other three and Celadon fell into step behind her.

No one tried to stop them.

They'd almost reached the door, when a most distinctive noise sounded behind them: something like a bell, something like a transporter beam.

'No,' thought Celadon, 'it couldn't be…'

That couldn't be the sound of a Warp Pad…?

"Muscovite!" called a voice that unmistakably belonged to Steven Universe.

Celadon stiffened. Whatever they were here for, it would probably be best not to get them involved. That meant that she needed to act as though nothing were wrong.

Considering how off-balance Celadon was feeling, it would be hard to lie convincingly… but assuming she could keep a straight face, it should be easy enough to tell them that Ash and Sai had decided to fuse permanently à la Garnet.

At that moment, there was a sharp shriek of off-key instrument playing.

Celadon turned to see the Orchestra and found all the musicians looking at her disapprovingly.

Ash and Sai would lie by omission, this was true, but rarely would they invent outright fabrications.

But Celadon, on the other hand, actively concealed things from her components. She lied to avoid upsetting people. It was a central part of her nature.

And now she couldn't get away with it.

Damn it.

She turned to face the Crystal Gems, only to see them frown in confusion.

"Muscovite?" said Steven.

"No," she answered.

"Oh," said Steven. "Sorry. Who are you?"
Ah, yes of course. It wasn't a case of getting her and Sai's names mixed up, they'd simply never seen her before. They were expecting 'Giant Woman' not 'Tiny Fusion.'

Celadon sighed, shooting a last glance at the impassive musicians in a silent plea for mercy, before giving up and deciding to bite the bullet.

"...I'm Jean Valjean," she answered.

Meanwhile, within what could only be described as a Hell Plane, Ash and Sai maintained a careful distance. Whatever else happened, they would have to avoid fusing at all costs, or else Celadon would be trapped there with them. And the only way to ensure that…

"Goodbye, Ash."

"Goodbye, Sai."

The two walked off in opposite directions.

End of Part 2.

Chapter End Notes

"Glory Hallelujah" by Frank Turner. "The Skeleton Song" by the Mighty Mighty Bosstones.
AN: Cliffhanger streak continues, but I'm trying to keep updates roughly monthly. We'll see how long it lasts.

"…I'm Jean Valjean."

"What?" said Steven.

She didn't miss a beat. "I'm Celadon," she said, in the tone of one who was merely repeating herself. "Fusion of Ash Hughes and Saino Moore."

"But… you're short."

"An ad-hoc fusion between incompatible species, yes," she agreed. "Very little about me is normal."

She glanced at the musicians before adding. "…including the ability to exist at the same time as my components."

"They're here, too?" asked Steven, scanning around the crowd for Ash and Sai.

Celadon shook her head. Was this how honest people felt all the time? It was exhausting.

"They've died and faced judgment already," she said, regretfully. "They're gone."

Garnet hummed. "When I looked into the future an hour ago, I didn't see this. We just barely missed them, didn't we?"

Why did this perfect storm of accountability have to happen right now? She really, really didn't want to go into this in public. That was most of why she had left the Undertale contingent in the dark.

She could have ripped them a new one over the fact that they'd killed Ash in Sai's body, after all: that their so-called 'Pacifist' had died by their own hands.

While cruel and vindictive, such an action would have allowed Celadon to take some of her frustrations out on a convenient target, and kept her from being such a tightly coiled ball of stress... but in order to get the full effect, it would have also involved explaining why her components had switched bodies, in the first place.

...and, if she hadn't told her allies on the T'Kumbra, who had shown her hospitality and friendship, then those who had treated her with distrust and hostility most certainly didn't deserve to know.

Allies... was she really thinking of them as allies now?
Because, while Celadon certainly wouldn't try to justify her actions to her enemies, she actually did feel that it was important to explain herself to her allies. Doing it in public? Uncomfortable as it would undoubtedly be, that would allow her to kill a whole flock of birds with a single stone.

"… yeah," said Celadon, eventually. "That choice to leave was deliberate on both their parts."

"Waddaya mean?" asked Amethyst.

"I am able to exist simultaneously with my components due to a transporter accident—something like a Warp Pad malfunction," she clarified, upon seeing their blank expressions. "Despite the fact that we existed in three bodies instead of one, I could still read their thoughts. They'd each had passing thoughts of suicide, but they hadn't made any concrete plans… specifically because they knew that I'd know about it and stop them."

She shook her head. "Any truly effective effort between them would've had to have been concerted… and I am most definitely aware of any and all interactions between them… because I am the people, the person, that they are when they're both together."

"Suicide?" said Pearl. "But, why would they…?"

Celadon shrugged. "I imagine it has something to do with why you're here. We went back to the afterlife, briefly, almost a year ago. I assume you came to warn us that our capture was inevitable and to run?"

Here, she revealed a rueful smile. "They see me as an innocent, dragged down by their sentences and imprisoned by their actions. There was no real reason for them to stay in the afterlife… but they did, in the hopes that the 'gods' would not know of my existence and not think to look for me, even—and especially—if it meant sacrificing themselves in the process."

"…we came here to warn you, yes," Garnet agreed. "But Celadon?"

Celadon looked up.

"Primarily, we are here to help. To help you. In any way that you need."

Well, if that didn't just break through her ice-façade…

Hostility? That she could deal with.

Opposition? Disdain? Food for her inner troll.

But sincerity?

Nope.

Nope, nope, nope, not in the script, does not compute….

"I…" began Celadon, obviously taken off-guard. "Thank you," she said, because before anything else, that was something that she needed to tell them.

"…but I'm fine," she continued, with a glare at the musicians, daring them to contradict her.

"Well, then," said Garnet, not about to be deterred. "We should catch up. Looks like you've made some new friends," she observed.

Celadon froze. This wasn't good.
If it had been just the Crystal Gems… she would have lied.

If it had been just the Vulcans… she would have lied.

But both of them together? In an environment where lying was obvious? When neither of her components was here to stop her? *In front of the kids?*

Fuck it. If it wasn't fate, it was something close enough.

"All right… introductions," said Celadon, a fixed smile upon her face. "These are the Crystal Gems: Garnet, Amethyst, Pearl, and Steven Universe," she said, to the audience and the orchestra.

"Crystal Gems," she continued. "they are the Betazed Symphony Orchestra," she said, with a gesture at the stage.

"They are the crew of the USS Manhattan," she continued, with a wave at where most of them were sitting.

"They are the crew of the Starship T'Kumbra," she continued, before turning to her own companions. "…and these four are Athena, Dionysus, Mesolite, and Diaspore."

"Her children," said Athena.

"Adopted, I'm guessing?" said Amethyst with an amused smile.

"Actually, no," said Diaspore. "Biological."

"Wait, how?" asked Steven, in disbelief.

"Well, when a human and a Gem lack any shred of common sense…" began Celadon, before trailing off in exasperation.

"… yes?" asked Garnet, clearly waiting for the rest.

"Ahem, that is to say…" Celadon waffled, now looking extremely uncomfortable.

"Does the term 'parasitoid' mean anything to you?" Mesolite interjected, to spare her caretaker from having to say it herself.

Pearl frowned. "I… don't like where this is going."

Dionysus pulled out a Padd. "Do you mind, Cel?" he asked. "This would serve a dual purpose in getting the T'Kumbra Officers off our backs and bring the Crystal Gems up to speed at the same time."

Celadon just sighed and waved for them to go ahead. If anyone had the right to tell people, it was the four of them.

"If you must," she said with a glance at the audience, frowning as she noticed Alexander Xanatos, and then looking back to Steven Universe.

"Though perhaps we should relocate," she added. "Some of the footage is a bit… graphic, for children to see. And at some point, the orchestra should probably be allowed to finish their performance."

"You are from a culture where physical violence is censored regardless of context," said Dionysus.
"This is not so in the Federation. There can be stories where not a blow is exchanged… but malice and psychological damage make a film extremely distasteful. Likewise, the security footage of our time aboard the Nostromo… is violent, yes, but this is overshadowed by positive intent. We watched it when we were extremely young, developmentally, and it did us no harm save a few nightmares."

"But, the orchestra…" Celadon protested.

The conductor pointedly turned back to the musicians and they began to play once more.

"Fine," said Celadon, massaging her temples. "Just… viewer discretion is advised? What you're about to see was an… emotional experience for my components, particularly Sai."

Diaspore connected the Padd with the screen, and an image appeared.
The first impression for all of them was warmth. Not just body heat, but affection and protectiveness.

"It's okay, baby."

"Who's the best baby in the whole wide world? You are!"

"Here, num nums! Eat your num nums!"

"Awww!"

They weren't really sure what to make of Ash, their first caretaker.

The next impression was cool: cool and soft, guiding, helping them through education programs on the holodeck.

"Ah, that piece goes here."

"Try thinking about it like this…"

"Do you need help?"

"Here, I'll show you an example…"

This second, Sai, was more comprehensible, if still not completely devoid of useless sentiment.

The third was mysterious.

At first they hadn't known she was even there, because she never formed when they were around. She was Ash and Sai merged together, that much was obvious, and though they rarely saw her, sometimes they would hide outside sickbay, listening as she sung to herself. Neither Ash nor Sai could sing. Why this third could when they couldn't remained a mystery.

Most of the songs didn't make a great deal of sense:

"I heard there was a secret door
That Smeagol used to escape Mordor
But you don't really care for Smeagol, do you?
First head on up to Shelob's lair
Sneak past the orcs, go up the stairs
And pretty soon you've walked right into Mordor
...but it did become clear that the more oblique and opaque the lyrics, the worse their third caretaker was feeling.

"The penguin and leviathan
as luck would have it we were drawn
into a river recently
which took a decent piece of me.
I knew I thought, I understood:
this is a game of public good
And I, for one, am good with that
So currently that's where we're at.
Let's just leave well enough alone for now.
We should say goodnight
And I believe the penguin and leviathan
In the morning everything will be alright."

Even the songs that were mostly coherent could have unsettling undertones.

"Cleaning the lab, schooling my features,
Make sure the creature stays on the slab.
Walls are bleeding, steel is gleaming,
When you're cleaning the lab."

...and even direct quotations could be worrying, such as the first time they'd actually spoken to her.

"The time will come when you’re almost gone
And you'll try to guess, but you'll never know
You'll do your best and you'll soldier on

Every day you're here 'til it's time to go.

All the good things and bad that you do and don't have,
you can find out for sure if you've got 'em.

'Cause it's a spiraling staircase that you're falling down,
and you're nothing but dead at the bottom.

DNA, you're in my heart.

DNA, in fact you're in every part of my body.

Each cell has a nucleus.

Each nucleus has chromosomes.

D.N.A., baby, that spells 'DNA.'

She didn't look so good, her head cradled in her hands, her voice hoarse and subdued, her spine curved as she bent low over a Padd.

After exchanging glances, the four of them entered the room, in mutual agreement that a distraction was needed.

"What's 'Worm double-you'?' asked 9XO, reading over her shoulder. Even at three-odd weeks old, they were taller than Sai by several inches, and taller than Ash by nearly a foot. The four Romulans virtually towered over the much shorter Celadon.

Their caretaker looked up, startled at their presence.

"Not Worm double-you," she answered. "'Worm Tungsten.' War for short."

"I thought you were Celadon?" asked 7XO. That was what Sai and Ash had called her, at least.

"I am," said Celadon. "Worm is my pen name."

"Why did you choose that particular moniker?" asked 10XO.

The Fusion snickered. "Because Ash vetoed 'Trashlar Verminion' and Sai vetoed 'Poundfoolish the Farting Mime.'"

"Cela—" began 8XO, before catching herself, "ah, War?"

She shook her head. "Just Celadon is fine. The whole point of a pseudonym is for it not to be widely known."

"I… see," said 9XO. "What are you writing?"

"Dragontales/Game of Thrones crossover fanfic."

"...may I see?" asked 7XO.
Celadon blinked. "Of course. Here's the chapter I'm working on..." 

Once they reached adolescence, a week later, things changed.

Ash became more subdued.

Sai became less so.

They passed Ash staring blankly at a wall.

When she noticed them, she smiled and stopped doing it until they left.

… only for them to find her in a different part of the ship later, doing exactly the same thing.

Then, they overheard Sai listening to a song and crying. They didn't reveal their presence, but they did stop and listen:

"Kick it up a notch

Oh my plan is all about to unfold

There's no attempt that you can you can botch

You've just gotta give those dice a roll

When we kick it up a notch

It's blood for us, and brains for me!

I'm gonna let this little snot

But only because I know he'll actually…

Feed my hunger for flesh! I want it warm and fresh!

Oh Pincer, you're in for a treat!

Let's kick it up a notch.

So at last. I'll. Have. Human meat!"

They were deeply disconcerted.

"That was from something," 8XO observed.

"What was it from?" asked 7XO.

The next day, their caretakers asked if they would be alright if left alone for a day or so.
They agreed, wanting some time to snoop unobserved.

After the two had left, via some method none of them could figure out, the four turned to the Nostromo’s database.

They searched, and found in Sai’s files a musical called 'Starship.'

They started it

They didn't get very far in.

"Is… is that really how insect species reproduce?" asked 10XO.

They looked it up.

While it wasn't how most insect species reproduced… it was how the Romulan species reproduced.

What happened to their hive? Where did Ash and Sai get their eggs from? Why were there dead androids? Why were they on a stranded ship? An abandoned ship?

"Computer, what is the earliest timestamp when Ash Hughes, Saino Moore, or Celadon were first seen onboard?"

The computer gave them a date, they pulled the security logs and began to watch.

It was Celadon, when she'd first appeared on the stranded Romulan cargo vessel, the Nostromo.

They were eventually able to piece together her progress as she moved through the corridors, was ambushed by something… by 7XO? And lured the lifeform to the medical bay.

It showed Ash and Sai’s initial argument, then Ash leaving the medical bay.

She stood, a moment, facing the containment field.

Then, at her verbal command, the field dropped, the intermediate sprang forward, and Ash toppled backwards, falling back against the sick bay doors.

Sai opened the door to find the intermediate latched onto Ash's face. The human was quickly slipping into unconsciousness. Her last act was to hold up a hand and give Sai a thumbs up.

Sai had taken Ash and brought her into the sick bay and onto a bed.

She was monitoring the human's vital signs, as well as those of the intermediate.

Both were healthy, even though that was impossible, in the long term.

After twelve hours, the intermediate detached, and her scans showed that the embryo was implanted, latched onto the human's circulatory system.

And Ash regained consciousness.

"Congratulations," said Sai, "It's a parasite."

Ash giggled, somewhat hysterically. "Remind me again whose species it is that reproduces virally?"
"That's different!"

Ash noticed how strongly Sai reacted, and the smile dropped off her face, to be replaced with a look of concern.

"I know it is," she said. "Sorry. I didn't realize it would bother you so much."

Sai shook her head "I can do this. But Ash? I've been reading through the literature and I don't think I can do this running warm."

"That's fine."

At Ash's words, any semblance of feeling or sympathy leached out of Sai's face. "Very well," she said. "Would you like the bad news or the worse news?"

Ash shrugged. "Surprise me."

"Fine," Sai bit out, resentment slipping into her voice before she managed to slip back into monotony. "As you surmised, these 'xenomorphs' as you call them are indeed sentient. One of which is growing in your chest cavity, putting stress on your lungs and internal organs, even as it draws what nutrients it can from your bloodstream and fat reserves, before moving on to the 'main course.'"

Here, she paused. "Now, you are likely thinking 'so what?' because dying for the sake of a child when you were explicitly ordered to be less virtuous seems to be the height of hilarity as far as your sensibilities run. Am I wrong?"

Ash snickered. "No, you seem to have my measure," she agreed.

Sai sniffed. "Unfortunately," she said. "Things are not that simple. What do you know of the Critical Period Hypothesis?"

"If I ever knew about it, I sure as heck don't remember now."

"It is a theory of linguists that the younger children are exposed to their first language, the fewer language difficulties they will face later in life. Of course, things like socialization, emotional support, and such cannot be discounted.

"This is relevant," continued Sai, "Because Romulans are tactile telepaths. Neither of us is telepathic. Therefore the child will not be exposed to one of the critical language components of Romulan society. Or at least, not in a reciprocal manner."

"Is that why you're…"

"That is why I look different, yes. I've incorporated enough Romulan DNA to allow comparable amounts of telepathy. But that is only part of the picture. We could be recaptured at any moment, leaving a child in total isolation."

"Shit."

"… It should be noted that there are three other eggs on the ship. They are in stasis and can remain so indefinitely. However...

"Yeah, the snowball effect," said Ash, her eyes becoming slightly wild. "Do one good thing and soon it's two, then three, then…"

"Four, Ash. The eggs are only four in total."
"Ok. Four." She took a steadying breath. "I can do four. I can do this. I can."

"Did I mention that Romulan infants are particularly sensitive to negative emotions in their hosts?"

"Oh my god, this is gonna suck." Ash winced. "Happy thoughts, happy thoughts…"

"Quite," said Sai. "Hence my suggestion that you stay doped up on my own homebrew mixture of oxytocin/dopamine mimics."

"Wait, really? Sign me the hell up!"

"Once you are, shall we say, 'high as a kite,' you won't be able to make decisions," said Sai. "Which is why it's important that we discuss things now. This will damage you."

"Uh, yeah?" said Ash, unsure why Sai was bringing up the obvious. "We're both dead anyway."

Sai frowned. "True but self-destructive impulses are rarely helpful. I don't just mean physical damage. Flood the body with dopamine and it stops producing as much as it normally would. This could affect your state of being, induce depression, make social bonding harder…"

"Yeah, but both of us are already screwed in the long term anyway. Short term benefits win out."

"Very well. You are certain?"

Ash nodded. "Do it."

"You wish for me to do what? Clarify."

"Drug me, and use me to hatch the four eggs."

"You are certain?"

"I am certain."

Sai gave Ash a grenade and stepped back.

Over the next few minutes, Ash became less and less coherent.

Sai looked more and more conflicted.

Ash came over and patted her arm comfortingly.

It should have been funny.

But all it did was drive home how helpless Ash was… and how similar this was to Sai's job as a Cultivar.

Sai burst into great, shuddering sobs that wracked her entire frame.

Eventually, she pulled herself back together and rose once more.

She had work to do.

Two days later, Sai scrubbed blood off the walls with a dead expression while Ash cooed over the...
young Romulan, finding its attempts to disembowel her nothing short of adorable.

One week later there were two of them, though 7XO was old enough to start developing rudimentary language abilities. Both 7XO and 8XO remained indifferent to Ash's attempts at parenting. And to each other.

One month and the youngest of the four Romulans was developmentally at the level of a human five year old. All had responded to Sai's attempts at Vulcan upbringing with the same indifference they'd shown Ash's try at human parenting. The four of them seemed happiest when left alone in the holodeck with the learning programs. Not even in the same holodeck, they each claimed a holodeck for themselves, the older kids making no effort to help the younger.

The two would-be parents left them to their own devices, informing them numerous times that they were there should the four of them need anything.

"I think you should be safe to go sober," Sai told Ash, one morning when the two were alone in the mess hall.

Ash exhaled in relief. "Oh, thank god."

Sai looked mildly concerned. "Are you all right?"

"When things aren't the way I expect them to be," Ash began, "I immediately start doubting my sanity and the accuracy of my senses. This month has been an endless feedback loop of questioning my own existence, while remaining perfectly aware that I am not lucid. How are you?"

"I keep breaking into a cold sweat every time I'm reminded of my time as a Cultivar, but otherwise fine. Here."

She offered Ash a grenade.

Ash crushed it, inhaled the fragments, and flopped over backwards in relief.

"Even if they're not mine," Ash said, her voice hoarse and tired, "I'm still glad we did it."

Sai did a double-take. "Ash, they're as much your children as anyone else's."

Ash raised her head slightly to make sure Sai wasn't joking. "What do you mean?"

"The host's DNA serves to fertilize the embryo," Sai explained. "That's why many of them send their eggs off-planet, apparently. The host used influences the child's genetics and development. Many of the most beneficial species cannot be kept alive on-planet."

"Oh."

"Are you alright?"

"It's just... you know my family. If I had a child out of wedlock... well, it would be seen as very low class. Not that it matters at this point, but... it's kind of funny. Do they have names, yet, or are you still using the Gem nicknames?"

"Not unless they've picked them themselves. Why? Do you have any ideas?"
Ash shrugged. "I don't know any Romulan names, but, if they were human, I'd name one of them Athena and one of them Dionysus."

"Why?" asked Sai, looking nonplussed.

"Athena was the Greek Goddess of Wisdom," Ash explained. "Zeus, King of the Gods, ate her mother shortly after she was conceived. Athena grew inside her father's head afterwards, and is considered a 'child of the mind.' Dionysus was the God of Wine. His mother died while pregnant with him, and Zeus sewed the child into his leg to finish maturing."

Ash looked at Sai. "Go on, say it."

"I wasn't going to, but, if you insist: they sound an awful lot like xenomorphs."

Ash nodded. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"If they were Gems, what would you name them?"

Sai scoffed. "If I worked in a kindergarten, it would be because they needed more Gems of my type. Any Gems produced would be similar to myself. Hmm, perhaps Diaspore or Mesolite…"

"I like those," said Ash, with a smile.

"Thanks," said Sai, returning the expression, weakly. "But we should probably start hunting for actual Romulan names."

"Of course," said Ash.

A few days later, Ash and Sai were going through the media library in the officer's lounge. The four Romulans were there as well, having finished their own primary education. They had taken to following the two of them around, but didn't seem much inclined to speak.

One wouldn't have expected to find data on the Federation on a Romulan ship, but apparently one of the android officers had had a fondness for earth animation, and they found several hundred years of the stuff in the data archives.

Including, as it turned out, nine seasons of Steven Universe.

After receiving assurance from the four kids that they'd be fine on their own for a day or two, they made their plans.

They would fuse into Celadon and go to sleep.

Ash would go back to her home version of Earth. Apparently Sai was on a sabbatical, and no one should have noticed that she was missing. While there, she would attempt to find all the latest episodes of Steven Universe, all the Star Trek series, the entirely of the Alien Franchise, and any other fictional series she could think of that they didn't already have.

And Sai would go to Steven's Universe.
After the monitor had gone blank again, all was silent in the auditorium. Even the orchestra made no noise, as they waited to see what Celadon's reaction would be.

"That," said Celadon, "...was a found-footage film."

"Did you enjoy it?" asked Diaspore.

"It was a hell of a lot better than any movie I've ever made," Celadon admitted. "I always get stuck on the storyboards."

"Well, naturally, we didn't use those," said Dionysus. "And the content?"

"First off, good job with the discretion shots," began Celadon. "Makes it more 'art-house' and less like a snuff film." She made a face. "Or a fetish-film."

"Fetish?" asked Athena.

"If it exists, there is porn of it," said Celadon. "No Exceptions. Rule Thirty-Four of the Internet."

"Is that why you never told anyone?" asked Mesolite. "You were worried they'd think your motivation sexual?"

She shook her head. "I put the 'ace' in 'space,' and people assuming otherwise is never anything but hilarious. No, it's... hard to articulate, but...

"Ash and Sai..." she sighed, "...I've rarely had my life made worse by someone who thought I was a bad person. I'm not saying it never happened, but it was unusual. What was far more normal was for someone to make my life hell because they thought I was a good person, and therefore I owed them something."

"And, honestly? It shouldn't matter what people think of me. Thinking that I'm a bad person shouldn't stop them from treating me like a person. And in this universe? It never has."

"That's... probably why I was so complacent, when the Undertale bosses showed up. I'd gotten too used to people being reasonable. And to erring on the side of caution."

"You mentioned this already, didn't you?" said Mesolite, "that you didn't regret your actions..."

"... but that you didn't wish to repeat them," finished Dionysus.

"That's why you switched bodies," said Athena, in realization.

Celadon nodded. "Ash was afraid she'd be used as an incubator again. Sai was afraid she'd be made to help. Given everything that happened, it was an irrational fear but... can you blame them?"

"Your lack of self-control is something we are well familiar with, by now," said Diaspore, in what was probably meant to be a reassuring tone of voice.

Celadon chuckled. "Sorry. I know you find it embarrassing."
"As far as caretakers go," said Athena, "we could have done far worse."

"Much better to have defaulted to Human socialization or Vulcan socialization when unneeded than to have defaulted to 'xenomorph' socialization when one of the others was needed," said Diaspore.

"Even if it was... embarrassing," Athena finished.

"Still, we're sorry for the fear you've suffered because of your decision to raise us," Dionysus added.

"Don't be," said Celadon, with a shrug. "I worry over everything. If it hadn't been that, it would have been something else. If anything, this stopped Ash and Sai from being able to dump all their energy into agonizing over whether or not they were Mary Sues."

"We... have some thoughts on the matter," said Mesolite. "If you'd like to hear them."

Celadon blinked. "Of course."

"They're not Mary Sues," said Dionysus. "They're Nurture Sues."

"That's not a thing," said Celadon.

"I've seen Sai's fanfiction library," Mesolite. "It's a thing."

"Okay," said Celadon," then what is it?"

Diaspore cleared her throat. "Author Avatars raising fictional children is a fanfiction cliche," she announced.

"Oh, God," said Celadon, dropping her face into her hands and looking mortified.

"The kids in such stories do have personalities," began Dionysus, "most or at least some of the time… but their relationships with their human 'parent' are romanticized, whether in a positive or negative light depends on the author."

"One way or another, it usually focuses on the imbalance in power," said Diaspore.

"The human is usually more 'objective' about things," said Athena, "They know the child as fiction. On some level, this colors their awareness of them, if only in the way they problem-solve. The ways they treat them as not-quite-real."

"Another reason to do this is to live vicariously through another meta-layer…" said Mesolite, "through the writer's own fictional children."

"Usually this involves single-minded devotion to the surrogate offspring," said Athena. "Though this mainly serves to highlight the author's own virtues."

"They're nurturing, and the children love them," said Mesolite, "so they must be good people."

"Oh, God," repeated Celadon, "how did I never notice? I've seen this! I've seen it in SI Transformers fics with orphaned Sparklings, I've seen it in Homestuck AU's with Troll OC's, I've even seen it in Harry Potter crossovers with inexplicable Elves!"

"In normal circumstances this functions as a subset of the Power Fantasy genre," said Diaspore. "At least in cases where the children grow up to be more powerful than their adoptive parents."

"However," began Mesolite, "these are not normal circumstances."
Celadon stopped her mental spiral of mortification, intrigued by this new direction things seemed to be taking. "How so?"

"You and your components," said Dionysus, "did a lot of things that were unnecessary when raising us, because socialization itself was unnecessary."

"And so, in an inversion of the typical story," said Athena, "where the Human Sue remains relatively objective, and the offspring are emotional and dependent... we were four Romulan children... and you three were yourselves."

Dionysus cleared his throat. "The oxytocin/dopamine doping ensured that Ash emotionally bonded with us as thoroughly as any mother ever bonded with their children."

"However," continued Diaspore, "in the absence of Romulan socialization, we four, while not emotionless, have developed a mindset more Vulcan than Romulan, and certainly nowhere near Human. We rely heavily on logic, and have never reciprocated the emotional bond."

"In other words," said Athena, "Ash, and to a lesser degree Sai and yourself, were always much more attached to us than we were to you."

"If you truly were reality-warped" said Mesolite, "... this seems an unlikely outcome."

"Of course," said Dionysus, "there's the fact that you found us at all, which could speak as weak evidence of wish-fulfillment. Though hopefully not, as wish-fulfillment would likely have resulted in a less... painful experience for the three of you."

"But," began Athena, "at this point in time there's certainly not enough evidence to say one way or another."

"Nevertheless," said Diaspore, "if we had to pick a hypothesis to support... well, you do your best to destroy stories, not to create them. None of us would vote for Suedom."

"Thank you," said Celadon, still looking rattled, but appearing touched nonetheless, "that... it means a lot."

After a few deep breaths, she managed to regain her composure. "So," said Celadon, "anyone have any ideas on getting my components back?"

Mesolite cocked her head in consideration. "I'd look into gathering information on this so-called 'Undertale' Dimension."

"What were your experiences with them..." began Dionysus, "...to make them hate you to such an extreme degree?"

Celadon contemplated whether or not to answer them.

She had seen pieces of other people's lives that she had no right to see. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. It couldn't be either of those things... but it could be reciprocal.

Sort of.

Things were still weighted in Celadon's favor, of course, as she was essentially the narrator in this situation, and could spin things as she pleased.

In the background, the Orchestra began to play.
The screen lit up with a memory.

Celadon opened her mouth and began to speak.

In a void between dimensions, a laptop sat upon an invisible floor, forgotten, in light of a much more interesting source of information.

"Sure I can tell you about them," said Bill Cipher, cheerfully, to the Undertale group, "...but I'll need something in return. How's about we make a deal?" He finished, holding out a flaming hand.

Sans regarded it skeptically. "What do you want in return, exactly?"

"Twenty-three sets of Temmie Armor," was Bill's answer.

Undyne blinked in incredulity. "What the heck to you need TWENTY-THREE sets of the Cat Armor for?"

"I'm sure I'll find a use for them," said Cipher. "You want the deal or not?"

Their group regarded the floating triangle, assessing the veracity of his offer, attempting to guess what hidden motives he might have.

After a long moment, Frisk stepped forward. "Here," they said, dumping a pile of armor on the floor.

"Twenty-one, twenty-two, right!" said Bill Cipher. The armor sets vanished, and he grabbed Sans' hand with a grin. "Pleasure doing business with you," he said, before blue fire consumed his form and he was gone.

On the floor, where the armor had been, there was now a cardboard box.

Alphys opened it. "I-it seems to be... cassette tapes, and... a tape player?"

She found a tape labeled '1.'

She slid it into the machine and hit 'Play.'

Tape 1

"...'Undertale?' Sounds like a rip-off of that Alice in Wonderland remake..."

"...'A game where you don't have to destroy anyone'? I'm gonna save everybody!"

"...I am so very tired of bullshit morality..."

Tape 2

"That stupid, stupid flower! 'Friendliness Pellets,' my foot!"

"I don't know. 'Kill or be killed'. It's standard RPG mechanics, Ash."

"Screw mechanics, and screw Flowey, too."

"Okay. Have fun with your first boss fight."
Tape 3
"…Ash, it's been an hour."

"I'm waiting for Toriel."

---

Tape 4
"Sai, these monsters are sentient. Stop killing them!"

"Were sentient, Ash."

---

Tape 5
"By spiders, for spiders, of spiders."

"Ewwww."

"Ash, if you eat the Spider Donut and Spider Cider… then you'll be a spider murderer."

"I refuse to believe that sentient spiders would make food out of other sentient spiders."

"Believe what you want, but it looks like these are capable of writing, cooking, who knows what else…"

"I have faith that they wouldn't stoop to cannibalism just to make a quick buck.

"…also, I really need healing items, because Toriel keeps killing me."

"Heh. Get her to let her guard down and you can one-hit kill her."

"Toriel is my monster-mom. I'm not going to kill her."

---

Tape 6
"Sai, I accidentally killed Toriel!"

"Yay!"

"Not yay! I'm crying…"

"Sparing her didn't do anything, even after I did it, like ten times, she still wouldn't turn yellow."

"So I thought it might be like with the vegetoids? Those you either have to run away or hit them 'til they're almost dead before you can spare them."

"Or you can just kill them."

"Quiet, you.

"So, I got her down to maybe a fourth of her health, making sure to check for sparing at every turn— and then the next time I hit her she just died!"
"I tried it again, making sure to be extra-careful—and the exact same thing happened! This game makes no sense."

"That's because killing her is the only way out of the ruins."

"No! I refuse to believe it."

"Believe it or not, I'm walking on air…"

"No."

"…I never thought I could feel so free…"

"No. One of the frogs said that I might have to spare a monster, even when their name wasn't yellow. I'll just keep sparing her until I die. Which I probably will. A lot."

"Uh huh. Good luck with that."

Tape 7

"…I hate that flower so fricking much."

"You should kill him."

"Shut up, Sai."

Tape 8

"Sans is creepy as hell, also named after a font."

"Papyrus is okay, though."

"Did you kill him?"

"Maybe."

"Sai, I'm really starting to worry about you."

Tape 9

"Papyrus never kills me, even when I lose! Sai, how could you kill him?"

"In one hit."

Tape 10

"Undyne's killed me like fifteen times, already. Just what do I need to do to make friends with fish-knight?"

"More hit points might help."

"No. I won't kill things that are sentient."
"Ash, if we weren't supposed to level up, then why even have levels in the first place? What's the point of selling items which restore twenty-five hit points, if the player was never meant to have more than twenty?"

"I admit, killing the non-boss monsters was probably what the game developers intended, but that doesn't mean I'm going to do it. The description says that this is a game where you don't have to kill anyone. If they lied to me, I'm going to be very angry with them."

"Have it your way. Undyne's really hard to beat, even with all my stats and buffs. I don't see any way that you could do it at your level."

"Let me look.

"Huh."

"Sai, I just have to fight 'Undyne' not 'Undyne the Undying.'"

"Weird."

"No, the game's going easier on me, because I've made better choices! Ha! I knew I was doing something right!"

Tape 11

"What I love about Mettaton: he makes sure to kill me on live TV, so that all my friends can watch."

"What I love about Mettaton: he dies in one hit."

Tape 12

"UGGGH."

"Still fighting Mettaton?"

"Sai."

"What?"

"Sai."

"What?!"

"Our town had a scientist."

"Ok?"

"Who promised us she could assist."

"Oh, god."

"With all our little everyday affairs."

"She built assistant robot men"
"Who towered twenty-five foot ten."

"And said that they could meet our every care."

"Ash, go to bed."

"But her motives were ulterior, 'cause she felt she was inferior AND VERY MUCH TO MY SURPRISE THE METAL DEMON TERRORIZED."

"Seriously, Ash, fuse with me. We can meditate, and you'll feel better in the morning. We can paint each other's nails and shit. Just stop doing this to yourself, okay?"

"...okay. Thanks, Sai."

"You're welcome."

Tape 13

"I think you might be right."

"About?"

"The game rewarding you for not killing everything. I'm getting my ass handed to me by Sans."

"Sans?!"

"Yeah, go figure. He's actually terrifying, when you get him worked up."

"...He did say that the only reason I wasn't dead was because he promised Toriel he'd look after me..."

"Yeesh. What did you ever do to him?"

"Crap, this means I'll have to fight him, too, doesn't it?"

"Probably."

"...I am gonna need so many healing potions."

Tape 14

"I am a lord that is sometimes bored. Have some urges, and need to fulfill them. After my mayhem, I simply don't... what's the word? Care!"

"You're nowhere to hide, nowhere to run, this village will burn like the heart of the sun! With infinite glee, it's going to be me that slaughters the world."

"Finally got Sans?"

"I am become death, destroyer of skeletons."
“Okay, so I didn't have to fight Sans.”

“Really? He doesn't want to kill you?”

“Well… at least he doesn't want to do it himself? He basically just said, ‘congrats on not killing anyone. Solve your own problems. Have fun fighting the final boss with your twenty hit points,’ and then left.”

“Heheheh.”

“Sans, why?”

Tape 16

“Asgore, why?”

“Killed you again?”

“After ten times, I just tell him he's killed me ‘too many times to count.'”

“So, what you're saying is that you can't count past ten?"

“Apparently.

“Screw this noise, I'm gonna go try to make friends with Alphys. Only person I've made friends with is Papyrus and maybe Sans. I think I did something wrong, since I was never able to make friends with Undyne at all. I think she lost all respect for me after I ran away onto a volcano so she wouldn't be able to kill me.”

“Hmm. I finished the game. Got a crap ending. I'm going back through now. Guess I'll try making friends with everyone this time.”

“Good! Glad to have someone join me in happy, happy friendship land!

“…now, if you'll excuse me, I have a scientist to go stalk.”

Tape 17

“Ash, did you say that Toriel killed you?”

“Yeah, lots.”

“How? When you get down to one hit point, her attacks just stream around you without hitting.”

“Really?

“Oh.

“Sai, I am really bad at dodging.”

Tape 18

“Okay, I finally figured out how to make friends with Undyne.”
"How?"

"I burned her house down."

"No, seriously."

"…"

"Seriously?"

Tape 19

"Mettaton is a magnificent bastard, and I love him."

"Why?"

"At first, I thought he was an ineffectual harmless villain, because he really didn't seem to be committed to the whole antagonist shtick he was playing at… but that wasn't because of a lack of skill, it was because he literally lacked conviction. He was just humoring Alphys in her attempts to hijack the story for her own ends. The writing wasn't great, her acting wasn't great either, MTT was just doing the best he could with the material he had."

"Heheh."

"He was originally designed to be a terminator, you know."

"Mettaton? Mr. I Must Have The Spotlight Give It To Me?"

"Yeah, he told me that right before I killed him. Last time."

"Oh."

"Yeah, not too proud of that, now. But this means that he's the opposite of most science fiction AI. He was designed to destroy people, and instead decided that he'd rather be an actor."

"Aww. You're right, that is pretty adorable."

Tape 20

"Asgore, why did you destroy my option for mercy? That's all I have!"

"I killed him."

"You killed everyone."

"Hmm… this knife I'm using says it's good for cutting flowers. Maybe I can cut him a bouquet and then equip it as a joke weapon?"

Tape 21

"…well that didn't work. It says all I can do is fight, but I already tried that with Toriel and it killed her."
"I'm worried that if I do it with the final boss, it'll end the game without letting me go back and fix it, and then Flowey will eat my soul."

"I'm gonna go back and make sure I didn't miss anything. I never did find Temmie Village. Maybe that'll have a side-quest or something?"

Tape 22

"Well, I just paid for a cat to go to college."

"Ash, why would you waste your money like that?"

"To see if anything would happen."

"And did it?"

"It unlocked the best armor in the entire freakin' game."

"..."

"...I'm wearing this to go fight Asgore, bye!"

Tape 23

"Okay, I'm not even sure where to start with this game."

"How so?"

"I finished it."

"Really? Which ending?"

"Well, beating Asgore needed the exact same thing I tried to do with Toriel, only it allowed me to spare him before he died."

"Then, Flowey comes out of nowhere, kills Asgore, and becomes God."

"Have to fight him, spare the stupid flower, game ends with the monsters still stuck underground. After the game over, Flowey appears and he tells me to go back and make friends with Alphys."

"So I go back, make friends with Alphys, hook Alphys up with Undyne. I go through a creepy as hell laboratory dungeon, fight Asgore again, Toriel intervenes. Undyne intervenes. Basically, everyone intervenes. Looks like the game's over. Then Asriel shows up. He steals everyone's souls and the human souls. I beat him through the power of friendship, the game is finally over, happy ending, yay."

"You don't sound too enthused about it."

"... the game said we wouldn't have to kill anyone... and I didn't, technically. But Asriel was alive, and now he's dead. I couldn't save him, or the fallen child. Or Flowey (who might be the same person?) and definitely not Gaster."

"Who the hell is Gaster?"
"Scientist who was in a time-travel accident, I think, and erased himself. I want to go back and try again, but Flowey straight up told me that would be a horrible idea, so now I'm not so sure."

"Ah."

"What about you? You finally get the happy ending?"

"Not… exactly. At the end of the ax murderer run, you apparently lose your soul. I think that prevents you from getting the golden ending."

"That sucks."

"Yeah. At this point, I'm just ready to be done with the game."

"Hmm."

"Hey, Sai?"

"Yeah?"

"You wanna merge timelines?"

Chapter End Notes

"Theme from Greatest American Hero" by Joey Scarbury. "Dr. Franklyn" by The Cog is Dead. "Slaughter Your World" by Looking For Group, a parody of "Part of Your World" from the Little Mermaid
Alphys ejected the final tape and heaved a sigh. When no one else seemed inclined to comment, she gathered her courage and spoke. "I—I think that we may have been unfair to S-S-Sai," she said.

Undyne blinked. "Come again?" she asked.

"The timelines," Alphys clarified. "They've been amalgamated. And so have we."

"What?" said Undyne, still looking lost.

"I am the amalgamation of Alphys from two different timelines. You are the amalgamation of Undyne from two different timelines. All of us... we used to be two different people. That's why our memories are so contradictory and disjointed."

Mettaton frowned. "And how did this... amalgamation... happen?"

Alphys gingerly lifted the laptop. "When Ash and Sai amalgamated into Celadon, somehow it also amalgamated their timelines. This is visible in that the laptops—the windows into the test—have been amalgamated themselves."

"...and the word 'amalgamation' just lost all meaning," said Sans. "What's your point?"

"They took the test together," said Alphys. "Therefore, the results are meaningless."

"I had Chara," Frisk pointed out.

"But that was real," said Toriel, gently. "The test... we designed it to be taken alone."

"Why does it matter?" asked Papyrus.

"If you're watching my show with Sans, do you act the same way that you would if you were watching it alone?" said Mettaton, who had caught on fairly quickly.

Papyrus frowned. "I feel like I'm more myself when I'm with Sans, honestly."

Mettaton cocked his head, considering the sentiment. "Your personalities resonate, and you complement each other, yes," he replied. "You have an established dynamic that is comfortable and familiar. You are the stickler for the rules, while Sans is the wise-cracking layabout."

"...Yes?" said Papyrus, not seeing the relevance.
Mettaton laughed: a frivolous sound, but not without kindness. "Darling, Ash and Sai's dynamic seems to be that Sai is Evil and Ash is Good."

Alphys nodded in agreement. "They made their choices not because of morality, but because those choices fit the roles that they'd assigned themselves. Listening to their conversation, you can hear it very clearly: Sai makes the worst choices possible in order to rile up Ash, while also displaying obvious concern for Ash whenever she gets frustrated; Ash, while superficially disapproving of Sai's actions, seems more concerned with checking items off the 'good behavior' checklist than actually empathizing with any of us. Ash still supports Sai, even when her goal is genocide, because she values her friendship with Sai more than she values right and wrong, at least when it comes to 'games.' Neither of them took things seriously, so the data we have on them is all but useless. We were much harsher on Sai than was warranted, and much kinder to Ash than she deserved."

"It's good that we didn't manage to kill them, at least," said Asgore. "They did no lasting damage to us, we did no permanent harm to them. Things could have been much worse."

At his words, the tension in the room dissipated. Things had been badly handled, yes, but it hadn't been a disaster, by any means.

It was at that moment that another person appeared in the room. He was a pale young man, a water elemental in species, with a stoic, inexpressive face.

"Message for you," he said—ignoring their inquiries as to his purpose and/or demands that he identify himself—before placing a Padd upon an invisible bed and vanishing once more.

While the rest of them were still reeling and speculating, the taller of the skeleton brothers stepped forward.

"Live in Concert," read Papyrus, aloud, "The Betazed Symphony Orchestra Presents: Off The Rails, an improvised drama in mixed-media."

He hit Play.

After Ash and Sai had walked apart, Sai got about two miles away before being captured by raiders, blindfolded, and thrown into the supernatural equivalent of the back of a truck. Probably a pocket dimension, she decided.

The passage of time was impossible to mark. She was in Ash's body still, for which she was grateful. As far as Sai was concerned, Ash had already suffered enough for one lifetime. And she felt like, this way, at least a part of herself was still with Ash, protecting her from harm. Or from lasting physical damage, at least. This fact gave her no small amount of comfort and satisfaction. Especially since she knew that Ash would be incredibly annoyed at the fact that Sai had managed to steal her martyr shtick right out from under her.

Eventually, she was let out—or rather the feel of wind on her skin returned, as did ambient sound—and her blindfold was removed. Sai found herself in the midst of a group of people, all staring at her with anticipation.

"We. Have. Returned!" one of her captors announced.

"What's! Your! Name!" screamed the crowd in unison, in what couldn't have been anything but a call-and-response ritual.

"Clara Hart!" announced the man, in a louder voice that would carry to the crowd, before turning back to her.

"Welcome to Paradise," he said, with a genial smile.

The crowd broke into cheers.

Sai was given a tour. This place surpassed even the utopias she'd seen in Ash's favorite sci-fi movies... in terms of tacky architecture, at least. The zeerust was practically flaking off the decor.

"...as far as the afterlife goes," her tour guide was saying, "there's a Good Place and a Bad Place. You were in the Bad Place. This is the Good Place."

"Heaven sends raiding parties down into Hell?" asked Sai, nonplussed. "Aren't there... rules about that kind of thing?"

Her guide shrugged. "If the Big Guy knows, he doesn't do anything about it. And this isn't the whole Good Place, just one neighborhood. Lazithe's our Architect, and he doesn't care what we do, so long as we don't bother him with it."

"If we find her, we'll bring her back," the guide assured her, before suddenly seeming to remember something.

He hesitated. "...but we rescued you from Yocriel's neighborhood. Getting back in won't be easy; he keeps a tight leash on the souls assigned to him. About the only reason we were able to snag you was the fact that we got to you before you'd been identified by the system as a newcomer."

Sai nodded, disappointed but not surprised.

"Also, just so you know," Sai continued, "there's a good chance that you and everyone you know are fictional characters."

"In what kind of story?" asked the guide, not seeming bothered by this in the least.

Sai shrugged. "I haven't the faintest idea."

"... all righty, then. Thanks for the heads up."

And with that, they continued the tour.

Ash found her wanderings less interesting than had Sai. She remained in the hellscape, which resembled a cavern system near an active volcano. Rivers and streams of lava criss-crossed the floors. Tunnels occasionally gave way to larger rooms and chambers, but nothing here had been designed for human comfort. There was nowhere to sit or rest, not even so much as a bench or a floor mat. There was nowhere to sleep, as everything was lit with the harsh red glow of lava.

Well, at least she wouldn't suffer thirst or hunger since she was still... wait a minute, she was still in Sai's..."Sphinx of black quartz, judge my vow," said Ash, in the same exasperated tone that Sai might have
used to say, 'God almighty, give me strength.'

It wasn't as though they even *could* have switched their bodies back, not when that would have involved fusion. But that Sai hadn't even mentioned it—not to ask for a possession or two from Muscovite's Gem, not even as a parting joke—it left Ash torn somewhere between feather-ruffling affront and sheer, bone-breaking relief.

Or rather 'she-no-longer-had-bones-capable-of-breaking' relief.

Physical torture had always been one of Ash's greatest fears. Of all the virtues, she'd always placed the highest value on temperance, or, as it was called nowadays, 'discipline' and 'self-control.'

…and resilience under torture had always been a test that she'd been sure she would fail. That was, ahem, the impression that she got. (*Do-do. Do-do. Do-do, Do…*)

Crap, that was going to be stuck in her head all day, now.

Anyway, point was, if she'd been Indiana Jones, then torture would have been her snakes. *Anything but that.*

And now, thanks to Sai?

'Anything but that' was all but guaranteed.

Gems were designed to circumvent torture techniques. Not that such things were *impossible*, but any truly severe physical damage would cause them to 'poof' and retreat into their gem.

…and, in Muscovite's case, collapse into a shapeless mass of glitter until she could pull herself together again.

She didn't even feel too much guilt over Sai's fate since, even in Ash's body, Sai could still do things like turn off her emotions and dial down the intensity of nerve signals, due to body-modifications she'd walked Ash through applying, back when they'd both first died.

So, yeah, she was angry at the unfounded arrogance of those so-called 'gods' in sending her here.

She was resentful of whoever was in charge of this dimension for deliberately hurting people, when people were fragile enough already without outside interference.

But the one thing that Ash wasn't anymore?

Afraid.
Because souls did not sleep, and the caverns had neither windows nor clocks, Ash had no idea how long she wandered, trying to look like she knew where she was going, avoiding eye contact with anyone she came across.

Ash had never understood how exactly one took the initiative in making friends… and she had also always had an instinctive grasp of power dynamics. She knew that to try and fail to make allies would mark her as a failure, and a target.

She had survived high school and as much as she had of college by keeping her head down and looking busy. No reason to change a winning strategy, she supposed.

Like most people who’d read Ivanhoe by age thirteen, Ash had never been much for peer-to-peer networking. She could be social but, unless someone else approached her with friendly overtures, she usually defaulted to 'withdrawn and solitary.' It was safer that way.

Ash had never had a problem with solitude, merely with solitude in situations that made one vulnerable, such as when a group of teenagers was crammed together into a school.

Or when a group of souls was imprisoned together in hell.

Honesty, though? This wasn't anywhere near as bad as she'd remembered, for all that it should have been incomparably worse.

Maybe it was the fact that she'd already done this all before? That she'd gone through changing schools, moving homes, even leapfrogging back and forth across the line which separated life from death, and she knew that the loneliness she was experiencing now wasn't necessarily a permanent state?

More likely, though, it was the fact that she'd already made a friend since dying. The fact that she knew that she could, now, even without the benefit of a shared culture or even a shared species held in common. For all that that friend was an alternate version of herself, her friendship with Sai gave her no small measure of self-assurance.

Even in the depths of hell, she wore Sai's body as a gift, and a reminder of the trust between them.

Certainly, no one else had tried to speak with her, which was comforting, on one level. On another, she began to wonder if she truly existed at all, or whether people could even see her, that perhaps she was a ghost even among other ghosts…

Admittedly, some of Ash's uncertainty about the passage of time might have arisen from the fact that she'd spent a good portion of that time dissociating.

At any rate, after an indeterminate amount of time had passed, without any sort of summons, or even a change in location, she found herself standing before what could only be described as an angel.

…though Ash did not immediately find this reassuring. Wasn't there a C.S. Lewis quote on the subject? That demons and angels both came from the same stock, thus there should be no visual difference between them, other than those arising from personal grooming habits? It had gone
And since she was in Hell, she was also pretty sure that any angel she encountered here would be of the 'fallen' variety. And that any angel who looked anything like Ash would expect an angel to look was probably using the religious version of 'a form you're comfortable with.'

…which meant that this meeting was most likely planned.

The 'angel' himself wore the guise of a young man with dark hair and good cheekbones. He sat, praying or perhaps meditating, on the surface of a lava pond and, every now and then, he would mutter to himself in some weird, angelic tongue. He was clothed in robes and wore a blindfold which covered both his eyes.

At least, presumably he had two eyes.

Ash decided that she wasn't going to make the first move. She instead found the least-pointy bit of wall she could to lean against, while she waited to see what he wanted.

She couldn't have said how long she waited, because she lost track of time again, but, eventually, he turned his sightless face towards her.

"Ah," he said. "The newbie. Welcome to hell. My name is Yocriel, and I'll be your server today. What can I start you off with?"

Ash said nothing and, after a pause, Yocriel continued in a more serious voice, seeing as she wasn't rising to the bait.

"Not much of a conversationalist, are you?" he said, not seeming particularly bothered by her silence. "Well, just for point of interest, I should mention that I don't care what you've done," he told her. "I wouldn't care if you'd never done anything wrong in your life. My job is to make you suffer, and suffer you shall."

Normally, Ash would have collapsed like a soufflé under any sort of criticism from an authority figure, but now she no longer had a diploma to gain or a job to lose, so what was the point, really?

Her only real goal right now was to keep from arousing suspicion, to protect Celadon for as long as she possibly could.

To that end, she'd want to play the part of someone who belonged here.

Not necessarily the part of someone other than herself—no Ash was pretty sure that her karma had never been as great as she'd been told it was—but of a version of herself who unquestionably belonged here.

With that in mind, she made her reply.

"I'm fictional," said Ash, derisively. "Making me suffer is pointless. I was created for the sole purpose of suffering, in order to advance the character development of another. I was born in order to die. That's what was decided."

Stupid Fruits Basket dub. She didn't even like Akito. Why had that one single line, and its delivery, stayed stuck in her head for all these years? But Yocriel seemed to find something of interest in her statement.

"You blame your author for your suffering?" he asked, seeming darkly amused. "I can certainly
work with that. Any last words?"

She thought it over.

"I," Ash announced, "am no longer an agnostic. I am an atheist."

"She said. In hell. To her jailer," Yocriel commented, unimpressed.

"Just because gods exist is no call to go around believing in them," Ash pointed out.

"...Terry Pratchett, Small Gods. Or maybe it was Witches Abroad," she added, because she couldn't not.

"Thought so," said Yocriel. "It's decided then. You get a roommate."

For a long while they merely stared at each other, before the man cleared his throat and spoke.

"Suzuki Satorou," he said by way of introduction.

"Cultivar Muscovite," she said. "What are you in for?"

"Playing god?" he said, before glancing at the walls around them as though expecting something.

Ash looked as well, and was rewarded with the sight of a man in a pinstripe suit stepping through the stone wall, as though it offered no more resistance to him than a beaded curtain. Behind the man, a metallic tail swished back and forth with his steps. He couldn't have looked more the stereotypical demon if he'd tried.

The man stopped and merely stood, watching the two of them.

Suzuki Satorou looked away with a pained grimace.

…and Ash decided that she wasn't going to touch that with a ten-foot pole. She nodded sympathetically, instead.

"I came here from an off-brand Egyptian afterlife," Ash said, keeping with reciprocity. "They sent me to hell for being 'unbalanced.'"

She hesitated. "...but, I'm pretty sure that I'm in this room in particular because I mouthed off to our warden about how none of my problems were actually my fault, and that blame could be placed squarely on my author."

Here, the demon in the mirror-shades showed interest. "You were created by a Supreme Being?"

Satoru had drawn further into himself, and so she directed her answer to the demon. "I sincerely hope not," said Ash, with a shudder.

"If he was 'supreme,' that would mean that there was some meaning behind my design," said Ash, sure that she was failing to convey the depths of her revulsion, but giving it a go nonetheless. "...and if he'd designed me to be this way, knowing that I was a puppet of his that would come to life to live out his vision..." she shook her head.
"I was not the main character of my story," she went on. "I was the Manic Pixie Dream Girl who died to kickstart the plot, and provide the protagonist with a fathomless well of guilt. If my author was a mortal victim of the multiverse, that's one thing. We're all victims of the multiverse, in one way or another. It makes him a jackass, but not more than a jackass. On the other hand, if he were a divine being living out some sort of Pygmalion fantasy… that makes him evil. Call me old fashioned, but I'd rather have the jackass."

"You should forgive your author," said Satoru, suddenly. "It'll be a cold day," said Ash. And didn't dignify the cliché with completion, instead branching off into a new line of thought.

"I'm an author myself, Mr. Suzuki," she began. "I may not have always been perfect, but I at least tried to make sure that I treated my characters with respect and dignity, even if they did suffer. I put some thought into my character design and didn't just recycle 'dying waif' archetypes because it made for an easy premise. I hold myself to very high standards, and I won't respect anyone who can't match them."

At that moment, six other people entered the cavern. They looked like a group of LARPers. Or possibly escapees from a Dungeons and Dragons universe.

For at least a minute, they stood there, staring, as though they couldn't believe that Ash was actually there. Odd, it really seemed like they knew her. Last time this had happened, it had been Sai. Could they know her from a version of Four Stories Short?

"Oracle," said a woman in armor. "It's really you."

Ash glanced at Suzuki and the demon, but neither of them seemed to recognize her. Looked like they were all in the same boat.

"Do I know you?" asked Ash.

"Cootie," said a man in silver armor who stood next to her.

"...no," thought Ash, startled and slightly uneasy, the reminder more than enough to kick-start her memory.

"Gandalf," said an old man in wizard's robes.

"Merlina," said a short woman in a brown cloak.

"No," thought Ash, aghast, but the introductions continued, despite her mental protests.

"Trollminator," said a Ranger in a green dress.

"Greensleeves," said a Thief in a vest.

Ash let out a breath. "You're from Icewind Dale."

"We're from Faerun, yes."
Oh, shit. How was she supposed to explain herself? She could be an asshole and tell them the facts, she supposed. She and Sai had spent five months doing exactly that to random strangers. But, no, this was personal. These people deserved more from her. They'd come here for emotional closure, most likely, and so she would do her best to deliver.

"I was… very young when I guided you," said Ash, doing her best to adopt an expression of somber contrition. "I don't know how time ran for you but… the entire time that I spoke to you, I was never older than thirteen."

She looked up to meet each of their eyes in turn. "I thought that I was old enough, wise enough, to guide you, but… I was wrong. I nearly failed you in the Vale of Shadows. The only reason I found the lever was because I sought after a more experienced Oracle for aid. When you faced the foe who took hostages, I had no recourse. When you faced the dark artifact that seemed unbreakable… I despaired. I ran. I abandoned you, and tried to forget. I'm sorry."

She kept her eyes downcast awaiting their judgment.

"You left us," said Sting. "You left us among enemies, without warning, without even a goodbye."

"We were lost," said Trollminator. "We struggled. We came so close to death, so many times, and for what? Your cowardice and lack of resolution."

"Still…" said Gandalf. The wizard sighed. "You were cautious and reticent, but none of us ever thought you a child. How old are you now?"

"Thirty-eight," said Ash. "I could have gone back at any time before the age of twenty. It would have been difficult, but far from impossible. I didn't."

"There has to be more to it," said Greensleeves.

"There is," Ash admitted, readily enough, "but I've told you about the parts that were my fault. They were the pieces relevant for making an apology. The rest is somewhat… disturbing. And once heard, it cannot be unheard. Think carefully before asking after such knowledge."

The six adventurers huddled together. Eventually, they broke apart and faced her.

"We will think on it," said Merlina.

The party left.

Over the next—Ash supposed they must have been 'days' but none of them had slept, not even the perpetually-exhausted Suzuki—well, over the next stretch of time, anyway, she and her 'roommate' had made small talk. Or rather, after some rather spectacular failures at small talk, Ash had taken to ranting about writing, as she was wont to do, if no better topic presented itself.

"And I mean, don't get me wrong, I like Twilight," said Ash, "I have no problem with Vampire fiction in general—of course Sai and Celadon have problems with she-who-must-not-be-named, but so does every sufficiently-angsty fanfic author—but I feel like it's almost overdone at this point? At least as far as YA fiction is concerned. Which is a shame, because some of the first stories I ever drafted were vampire YA novels: coming of age, fish out of water cliché-ridden nonsense, but it's still kind of sad that I'll never be able to get them published now. The market's been glutted."

"The market for fiction here?" asked Suzuki, with a pointed look at the hellscape around them. His eyes had glazed over some time ago, but he still threw out a comment every now and then.
"A good point," Ash allowed. "Though they confiscated all my possessions when I died," she said, not mentioning that this was not her first death by a long shot. "The only way I'd write anything now is to memorize it or carve it on the walls. Memorization works all right for poetry. I spent a lot of school days composing poetry in my head when I was supposed to be doing actual work. And poetry sticks in the mind very well. A novel would certainly be more of a challenge."

She glanced at Suzuki and the demon, Demiurge, but neither replied. Ash wasn't deterred. She would keep this conversation going, even if she had to do it entirely by herself.

Luckily, before too long, she was given a respite, if it could be called that, in the return of six familiar characters.

"We have returned," announced Trollminator. "And whatever secrets or lore you know regarding our journeys, we would know them."

"Very well," said Ash. She took a deep breath and exhaled. "First of all," she began, "'Icewind Dale' was a game that I stopped playing when I was thirteen."

"A game?" asked Greensleeves.

"A game," Ash agreed. You were the party I created, but I never finished the campaign."

"You thought we were a game?" said Cootie. "But we moved, we spoke! Did you think we were cursed chess pieces?"

Ash paused, considering how best to frame things. "Do you know of automata?" she asked. "Clockwork, you mean?" asked Gandalf.

Ash inclined her head. "This is simplifying things a bit, but my people are very skilled in constructing them. We even have a rite called the Turing Test, whose goal is to make an automaton indistinguishable from a living being. Success was possible, or at least not far from possible."

"Why would you make your automata humanoid?" asked Sting. "You seem barely so yourself."

"This body isn't mine," said Ash. "I traded for it. This body isn't human, but I am."

"Was fear the only reason you stopped... 'playing'?" asked Merlina, her expression closed-off and cold. "No," Ash admitted. "My family had just moved. I played because I was I nervous about starting a new school, and I didn't have any friends. Once I settled in," she shrugged, "I got used to things, my life got better, and I didn't need the game anymore."

"And that's it?" asked Trollminator, in disbelief.

"Well, I also got frustrated with the gameplay," she threw out as a peace offering. "As I told you before, I almost quit in the Vale of Shadows. If my caretaker's colleague hadn't told me where to look for that lever, I'd have given up and stopped there. And then there was that boss who took hostages that I could never figure out how to save. Then that rock in the middle of the room that just kept killing all of you. I wanted to play a dungeon crawler, have some lighthearted fun, not beat my head against the wall trying to figure out how to advance the game."

"For us," said Cootie, "we were all born under the patronage of an Oracle. This Oracle gave us our
names, chose for us our skills and classes, and then determined that we go to Easthaven. We used your advice to divine our course of action, until, one day... you were gone. We were heartbroken, but we persevered, and learned to stand on our own."

"I was thirteen," said Ash. "I didn't make your game. I never intended you to be real. I had no clue that my actions in the game would have consequences for real people. But I am sorry, for abandoning you."

Greensleeves scowled. "You couldn't tell the difference between people and clockwork," he said. "Your apologies are worthless."

"But we would know one last thing," said Cootie, her expression stern. "Our names. What do they mean?"

Ash swallowed back a comment about how unfair they were being to her, and instead addressed the question at hand. "Well, Cootie..." she said, dredging up the aesthetics of her teenage self, "that was a nickname for a kid I babysat."

She turned to the Paladin. "Sting, I named you after a famed sword from the Lord of the Rings saga. It glowed blue in the presence of orcs.

"Gandalf, I named after the best-known Wizard from the same saga.

"Merlina, I named after the greatest magic user in my people's mythology.

"Trollminator was named after a golem who never failed to hunt down his prey.

"And Greensleeves was named for one of my favorite pieces of music."

"And what is your name?" asked Merlina.

"Clara Hart," she answered. "But my chosen name is Ash Hughes, for the serious tone of the prose I write."

"Child or not, we can't forgive you for what you've done," said Trollminator. "You understand that, don't you?"

"I am intimately familiar with grudge-holding, yes," Ash admitted. "What will you do now?"

"We will leave you," said Gandalf, "as you left us, to your suffering."

The Party left, and Ash dropped her head into her hands the moment they were out of sight.

"Are you quite well?" asked Demiurge.

"It's all hitting her now," said Suzuki, who appeared reluctantly moved. "She took such pride in the effort she put into the characters she wrote as fiction... but never thought that the game characters that she haphazardly created would come back to haunt her. Obviously, as she said, she'd never intended for them to become real. He bowed his head in sympathy. "Just like her author never intended her to be real."

Here, he hesitated, before adding, "Just like Ainz Ooal Gown never intended Nazarick to be real."

"Indeed?" said Demiurge. "Then why were you there when we 'became real' as it were?"

"The change occurred when Yggdrasil's servers shut down." Suzuki explained. "Everyone still
logged in at that point was transported to the new world, in the body of their avatar."

Demiurge's expression didn't change in the slightest. "In retrospect, that explains a great deal. The others will wish to hear this. Shall we?"

Suzuki looked startled, but more than a little relieved. "Of course," he said, standing. "I'm always at the disposal of the denizens."

Demiurge turned to Ash. "Would you care to join us?"

Ash quickly shook her head. She did not like him. She got the impression that Demiurge was the kind of person who could turn on her in a heartbeat, for any reason, or even no reason at all. Granted, she knew her instincts were not always reliable, but in this case, she didn't want to leave her assigned afterlife, so the choice to follow said instincts was an easy one.

"No, thank you," Ash answered. "Better the devil you know, and all that…"

"Quite," said Demiurge. "Fare thee well."

"Goodbye," said Satoru Suzuki.

And they were gone.

Relieved to be finally be alone, Ash sank down onto the floor and thought.

She stayed that way for a long while.

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Chapter End Notes

Slightly spoilery author's note, but do you guys want a fun fact about this chapter?

Of course you do!

Some of the theology/comedy nerds among you may have picked up on this already, but the quote that Ash is thinking of is not, in fact, a C.S. Lewis Quote. Though there is a C.S. Lewis quote that is similar to what she was going for. It's from The Screwtape Letters:

"Devils are depicted with bats' wings and good angels with birds' wings, not because anyone holds that moral deterioration would be likely to turn feathers into membrane, but because most men like birds better than bats."

And the quote that Ash is thinking of is this:

"Contrary to popular belief, the wings of demons are the same as the wings of angels, although they're often better groomed."

Bonus points to anyone who knows where the second one came from, or anyone who cares enough to google it, though I'll certainly reveal it when it becomes relevant to the story. This is a fanfic, not a literature class, and requiring my readers to do extra research
would just be silly.
The humans’ idea of a science fiction utopia stood in sharp contrast to Sai’s experiences on her own homeworld. For one thing, this realm retained artifacts of privacy and personal comfort. Rather than the storage cubbies Sai was used to, they had beds. Everyone had their own private rooms, with locks, and everyone was allowed to set their own schedule.

There was innovation as well, and not just in terms of technology. Though Sai would never stop being delighted by the novelty of roller blades, she found it still more bizarre and wonderful to hear music in public places, to watch movies as a social activity.

And now, now that she no longer had the sword of Homeworld’s inevitable invasion hanging over her, Sai had unwound enough to the point that she found herself socializing as she had never allowed herself to do in her first life.

And it was nice. Though she’d thought herself far above the raised eyebrows and stares that her appearance usually caused, the fact that Ash’s body made people think her something of an ingenue was oddly satisfying. Sai found the others’ attempts to protect and guide her utterly endearing, and touching beyond all reason.

Sai felt a good deal of guilt over the fact that she was living it up in ‘The Good Place’ while Ash suffered, but she also knew for certain that Ash would never ask Sai to trade her own happiness for Ash’s. Whether that was due to martyr complex or genuine friendship Sai was less sure, but she made every effort to advocate for Ash’s rescue at every possible opportunity, and was currently under training to join the raiding parties herself.

Because she was seen as something of a child, it was of little surprise that she was often paired off for ‘playdates’ with the other young residents, most of whom seemed much better able to tell that Sai’s mental age did not match her body than did the adults, and none of them had sought Sai out of their own volition. This pattern of ‘meet and retreat’ continued until, one day, the raiders brought back a girl with ebony hair, alabaster skin, and eyes that looked much like Sai’s had when she’d served under White Diamond.

"What's. Your. Name!" called the crowd, with a good deal less enthusiasm than they normally showed.

"Mica Vitrianna," announced the girl, looking cool and confident as only a teenager could.

Sai forgot, for a moment, that Ash wasn’t there, that—for all intents and purposes—she was Ash in this situation, and that everyone thought of her as a helpless little cinnamon roll that couldn’t even tie her own shoes.

"Holy Fucking Shit," said Sai. At a normal volume. In a register that carried over the crowd to everyone else.

'Mica Vitianna' turned to face her, her expression containing no small amount of curiosity.

"I'm Clara Hart," said Sai. "Do you know who I am?"
Mica frowned. "I'm afraid not. Why?"

Sai swallowed. "Because I know you. Can we talk?"

"...why don't you give her the tour, Clara?" suggested one of the others, tentatively.

"All right," said Sai, with a glance at Mica for confirmation.

"I have no objections," Mica said.

And so, they toured.

Sai showed Mica the parks, the library, and other such sensible parts of the neighborhood.

Then, they moved on to the main square, with its currency-less shops, its numerous and abstract sculptures, and its trip-hazard conveyer-belt walkways.

Next, they decided to take a break, of sorts, in the form of a detour up to the observation platform atop the largest and most Art Deco of the neighborhood's skyscrapers.

"Are you familiar with the concept of the multiverse?" asked Sai, broaching the first serious subject yet seen in their conversation of mundanities and snark.

"More than one universe?" said Mica as she gazed off into the middle distance. "That's not possible; the universe is everything that exists. There can't be more than one of them."

"...so, you probably don't know about parallel universes, either?" asked Sai, moving her attention to the view as well. If Mica didn't need eye-contact, well it certainly wasn't a requirement for Sai.

Mica scoffed. "Again, one universe. Everything is part of it."

"Okay," said Sai, "but guess what number I'm thinking of, between one and five."

"Three?" said Mica.

"Right, actually," said Sai. "But what if I had picked five?"

"You didn't," said Mica, "so there's no point in thinking about it."

"Sure," Sai allowed, "but imagine this: at the moment I made my choice, the universe split into five branches, one where I picked each number. Each branch of the timeline would continue on with its own version of whatever number I chose."

Mica paused. "Are you saying this happens every time anyone makes a choice?" she said, breaking the façade of indifference and turning to face Sai.

"I don't know," said Sai, with a shrug, since it seemed they were using body language again, "but I know that it can happen."

"You said that you know me," said Mica, recalling her statement from earlier.

"Sort of," said Sai. "I'm your author, once removed."

Mica's expression was unreadable. "Explain."

"Well," began Sai, "in some universes, there's a fictional cartoon show called 'Steven Universe'
about a young boy who goes on magical space adventures and learns about friendship and also horrible galactic tyranny. I... am NOT from Steven Universe. I am a character from a piece of Steven Universe fanfiction, which is when a fan of a story writes their own version of said story with their own characterization, and sometimes with whole new characters."

"Naturally," said Mica, her voice dry, with just the slightest hint of mockery.

"Now, in my universe," Sai went on, "I inspired a webcomic artist to make a comic with a character based off of me: Four Stores Short. It told the story of Jordan Mose, a young man who accidentally killed a young girl instead of himself during a suicide attempt. That young girl was Clara Hart, the character inspired by me."

"With you so far," Mica assured her.

"Clara Hart is the one who wrote a coming-of-age novel about a teenage vampire... named Mica Vitrianna."

"...Oh."

"I don't know if you're the same as your character was in the story that I know you from," said Sai, "just that there's a fictional version of you of which I am aware. Not that that means much. Everyone's fictional somewhere."

After that, they continued with Mica's tour for awhile, giving the newcomer a chance to digest the information she'd been given.

"And here's the thunder-dome," Sai was saying, "where we hold our death-matches."

"...I'm fairly certain that it's not," said Mica.

"No," agreed Sai, easily enough, "that's actually the sports stadium. Good catch."

"Incidentally," began Mica, "why is everyone staring at us?"

"It's the darndest thing," said Sai. "Probably the fact that I spent the last millennium of my life on earth and lived on Homeworld for the entirety of my time before that, but it took me rather longer than it should have to realize just how... homogeneous, this afterlife is."

"How so?" asked Mica.

"This place is full of humans," said Sai, "Only humans. And it occurs to me that, if I'd died in my own body, then they probably never would have rescued me."

Ignoring the troubled look which Mica was shooting her, Sai continued. "That this body's rightful owner hasn't been rescued, it's most likely because she's still stuck in my inhuman body down in Hell."

"And, I mean..." Sai shrugged, helplessly, "...I didn't even realize all of this on my own, it wasn't until you arrived that I really started thinking about the morality of it all..."

Sai sighed. "Because of your fictional counterpart, I assume you're a vampire, but you still look like you were very young when you died. You would have to have been, if you're familiar with the views and stances of the adults but haven't either internalized them or rebelled against them."

"The owner of this body has been called Pollyanna," said Sai, "but I'm not sure that Ash has
anything on you, honestly.

"And..." Sai went on, talking as much to herself as to Mica at this point, "...really, the problem isn't with you," she assured the other girl, obviously embarrassed at the admission, but determined to see it through.

"It's that everyone here is incredibly superficial," Sai finished.

"Excuse me?" asked a guy in plaid, who Sai had noticed following them, on and off, since they'd left the library.

"Sorry, just giving a tour," said Sai, smiling brightly, before turning back to Mica.

"Anyway, over here we have the living quarters..." Sai went on, obviously ignoring all the other residents, but especially Plaid Man.

Mica raised an eyebrow. "You do know that you're allowed to pick fights with people? You don't have to use me to do it by proxy."

Sai smiled in self-deprecation. "Much as I want to throw a fit, call them all out on their hypocrisy, rip off my shirt, and then burn it... I've read enough social justice blogs to know that if someone is getting picked on, the best course of action is not usually to scream at the bully, it's to go up to the victim and engage them in conversation, to shut the bully out of the equation by ignoring them. Screaming at people usually just validates their own belief system—God knows Ash loved it when people did it to her—but if you cut the rug out from under them, most people don't know what to do."

"Well, you're being very..." Mica hesitated, "...logical about this.

Sai giggled, somewhat hysterically. "I am the left brain, I am the left brain. I work really hard til my inevitable death' brain..."

"Still," said Mica, not sure what to make of what was clearly a quotation of some sort, "it's interesting that you characterize your actions solely in terms of their effects on others, without even considering their effects on yourself."

"Oh my God," said Sai, her eyes sparkling in delight, "you're an author avatar."

"Am I?" said Mica, seeming weirdly unnerved to be the recipient of Sai's affection.

Sai shrugged. "Well, Ash used to go on about how every little decision shaped the soul, and she was determined to whittle her soul into a perfect cube or some shit? She used to measure consequences like diet-freaks count calories. And then she'd dump all that pretense because she wanted to do something mean and petty. It was... frankly, very confusing."

"She sounds amazing," said Mica, with complete sincerity.

"And if you're an author avatar," Sai went on, "then you're most likely the self that she wished she could have been as a teenager."

"Interesting," Mica said, in a tone that sounded almost completely casual, "But I feel I should clarify: did you say that you were a body-snatcher?"

Sai waved a hand, dismissively. "I assure you, all my flesh-suits are ethically sourced." She paused. "Except maybe for my original body," Sai admitted. "But, to be fair, I had very little say in its
"That's... reassuring?" said Mica.

Sai nodded. "Fun fact: this body actually belongs to Clara Hart. That was why I introduced myself using her name. Long story short, Clara Hart and Cultivar Muscovite met each other in the afterlife after we died—not this afterlife, I've been transferred—anyway, we discovered that we could switch bodes. And so, primarily because we weren't supposed to, we did.

Sai gazed off into the distance. "I can only imagine what she's suffering now, because of that decision."

Ash, down in hell, had come face-to-face with another of her fictional creations. After the first ten, she'd quite lost track of what any of their names were supposed to be. She certainly didn't recognize the man who stood before her now in the slightest.

"You could have made my life better," he was saying, "but you didn't. And because of your actions, I—"

"You know what?" said Ash, her patience snapping like a tow-cable. "No."

"I beg your pardon?"

"So you suffered because of me?" said Ash. "Whoop de do. 'Man brings misery to man.' Everyone suffers because of everyone else; it's an inescapable part of the human condition. Do you know how much effort I put into minimizing the harm I brought to other people? I genuinely did my best, for years upon years. I agonized over that stuff. And now, even after trying my hardest, I still have to deal with all of this?" She shook her head in disbelief.

"This whole afterlife has just been a nightmare," said Ash, looking more than a little frayed. "Quite literally, these were the kinds of things I was terrified of as a kid. I was afraid to sleep because I was worried I'd wake up in someone else's body? That I'd already woken up as someone else but I couldn't tell because my memories were still in my old head? Boom! You get fusion!" she began to pace as she ranted.

"I would get choice paralysis because I was convinced something catastrophic would happen if all my decisions weren't absolutely perfect? Boom, now I get chewed out over things I'd never been told were possibilities. Things I could certainly have avoided, but saw no point in doing so." Here, she stopped.

"Congratulations!" said Ash, raising her head to reveal a somewhat manic grin. "You've managed to do what five years of public education failed to accomplish: turn me into an unrepentant asshole.

"If I'm going to get yelled at no matter what I do... well, I'm not going to stop following my moral code, but I sure as hell am going to stop flagellating myself over every little miss-step. Apparently, there's a vocal multitude out there that will hold me accountable, regardless of good faith on my part.

"You don't need to forgive me," said Ash. "I'm sure as hell not going to forgive my author. But, even if I had the choice, I wouldn't do this to him. Because I am an adult with a modicum of self-control, and I can process my own feelings without needing to tear into someone else for catharsis.

She shrugged, somewhat wistfully. "Maybe, if I were a better person, I would forgive him, but trying to manufacture feelings of forgiveness where they don't exist and are purely hypothetical... well, frankly, I can find better uses for my time and energy. And, while I can't agree that this is a good use
of your time—or anyone's time, frankly—I acknowledge that there's no way I can conceivably stop you, or anyone else, from coming here to yell at me. Just don't expect me to keep reacting to it.

"And now, to you, sir, I have just one thing to say:" said Ash, to the person in front of her, but also to Yocriel, wherever he was.

"I'm sorry, for things I've done that were wrong or caused suffering. But I don't owe you or anyone else my anguish."

With that, she sat down, leaned against the wall, and closed her eyes.

"Now see here!"

Ash cracked an eye. Then, recalling Sai's instructions, succeeded in shutting off her hearing.

She closed her eyes once more.

Chapter End Notes

Bo Burnham "Left Brain, Right Brain." "This Be the Verse" by Philip Larkin. (I first heard it referenced in Lemony Snicket's "A Series of Unfortunate Events")
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ash sat alone in the caverns, considering her options.

Yocriel must have decided to go back to unfinished video games because, after something of a reprieve that she'd found—in complaining about how hard her life was to two nice men named Jurgis and Candide—she'd wound up having to explain to Harry Potter why she'd abandoned him, with an eighth a lightning bolt of stamina, to fight a Basilisk all alone in the Chamber of Secrets.

Later, it had been the Tasmanian Devil from the Looney Tunes. He'd been unintelligible, but Ash had supposed that he'd wanted answers for why he'd been left on his own in a shopping mall, an explanation which she had done her best to provide.

Both of them had seemed to be acting in good faith, and so Ash hadn't been able to stick her head in the metaphorical sand and ignore them, much as she might have liked to.

But now, Papyrus seemed to have shown up.

And then Sans.

And then Undyne the Undying, Neo-Mettaton, and Magical Scientist Alphys.

"Well," Ash said, with a dark grin, "we meet again, it seems."

"We saw the concert," said Undyne, looking unimpressed. "We know that you're actually Ash."

Ash dropped her smile, adopting a dead-eyed stare instead. "Then what do you want? I finished your game, and I didn't kill any of you."

"True," said Mettaton, "but that doesn't, by any stretch, make you a good person."

"We're something like gods ourselves," said Sans, "and we looked you up."

Alphys stepped forward and pushed up her glasses, before clearing her throat and speaking. There was no trace of a stutter on her lips.

"Perception can change reality," she said. "This fact is well-documented: the Placebo Effect necessitates double-blind testing for medicine, because belief in recovery is sometimes enough to make people recover, all by itself; the Halo Effect, and the Horns Effect as well, states that good or bad reputation will drastically affect interpersonal interactions; and experiments have been run showing that, if a teacher is given a list of false IQ scores for their class, that they will treat the children differently to such an extent that their performances will begin to change to more closely reflect the false scores."

She paused.

"That last experiment is actually fairly close to your own situation."

Ash narrowed her eyes. "Do tell."

"You were told that you were a 'light' soul," Alphys continued, "and Sai was told that she was a
'heavy' soul. Your relationship was founded on a false premise that distorted all subsequent interactions between the two of you."

Ash regarded them, suspiciously. "And how do you know this?"

"Because your particular afterlife has a somewhat peculiar arrangement regarding the soul," said Alphys. "They're not precisely Egyptian. They instead seem to be mimics drawing from Egyptian-inspired archetypes to increase their own recognition and power. To more closely imitate mummification, every soul in their realm is given a reconstructed body, as well as a 'heart,' which is an imprint of the soul and which carries the weight of said soul's karma."

"The problem with that system," said Papyrus, "is that having the soul's karma stored separately from the souls themselves can lead to… eh, let's call them, 'filing errors.'"

"Your 'heart,'" said Alphys, "was switched, possibly accidentally, with the heart of an Ash Hughes from an alternate universe. Sai's heart was likewise mixed up with the heart of another Saino Moore."

"We were able to track your original hearts down," said Sans, "And, as it turns out, your heart is steeped in negative karma, and Sai's heart is one of the lightest they have on record."

"But the fact that you were told false information about yourselves seems to have skewed your behavior," said Alphys, "to such an extent that you have sacrificed yourself on multiple occasions for the sake of other people, and Sai was willing to commit genocide-by-proxy."

"Your point?" said Ash.

Mettaton frowned. "Your response to most situations seems to involve some combination of righteous indignation and martyrdom. We simply wish to inform you, in unambiguous terms, that you are not a good person."

Ash snorted, unimpressed, and began to pace. "All right, sure, I'll admit it:" she said, "I am petty. And egocentric. And somewhat judgmental. But it is not your place to be the ultimate arbiter of what I can or cannot be. You may be powerful enough to judge me..."

She whirled around to face them, shooting the monsters a glare. "...but that doesn't give you the right."

After a few minutes' unproductive staring contest, the Undertale Bosses faded away from the caverns and were gone.

It shouldn't have bothered her.

It shouldn't have.

But it couldn't be denied that Ash hated being judged and found wanting, even if it was by nonsensical metrics. That was why she made a point of deliberately disappointing and antagonizing people, whenever she could.

After all, if she made a genuine effort and failed, well, that was pathetic. But refusing to try in the first place allowed her some measure of certainty over the outcomes.

There was no such thing as a sure win.
But a sure loss? That was another story, entirely.

Of course, Ash had genuinely tried her best during her 'pacifist run,' and on all those other games that she'd stalled out on, as well, so it was a little late to start affecting disinterest now.

Ash had had enough whack-job professors in college to be well-aware that it was impossible to keep everyone happy, no matter what she did, but that didn't stop her from feeling like she'd failed, regardless of how unreasonable such a thing was.

Yocriel joined her not five minutes later.

"Well," he said, "they do say that pride goes before the fall."

Ash eyed him, warily, "You would know, I suppose," she said.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked.

Ash blinked. "Aren't you Crowley from Good Omens?"

"I don't know," he returned. "Aren't you Lea Zamora from Whirligig?"

That threw Ash for a loop. "Aren't I who?"

"I could have been this 'Crowley' perhaps," he allowed, ignoring her question, "if the world had been made differently. I, however, have always been an angel."

Ash sucked in a breath. "I thought this was hell?"

"Much like you traded your old body for your current one, I traded domains with a demonic colleague of mine," Yocriel explained. "Lazithe gifted the humans his sword when they lost Eden. And he fell for it."

Ash eyed him, appraisingly, for a moment.

"Were you the serpent?" she asked.

Yocriel nodded. "As I was commanded to be."

"Fuck," said Ash.

Yocriel looked surprised. "I would have thought you'd be relieved to be under the care of an angel rather than a demon?"

Ash shook her head, a useless gesture, as he remained blindfolded. "Those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience."

"C.S. Lewis," said Ash, "God in the Dock."

"God does not wish to torment your natural self, but to kill it."

"C.S. Lewis," said Yocriel. "Mere Christianity."

With that final remark he vanished, leaving Ash once again alone.

After sitting there by herself for who knew how long, Ash had something of a revelation.
Crowley had been one of her favorite characters in all of fiction, but he was a character. And that was different, she was coming to realize, from being a person.

Canonically, Crowley had spent six thousand years on Hell's payroll 'just following orders.' If he'd existed in her universe, then he would've had no qualms about harming her, just as he'd harmed countless other humans executing his clever ideas, nor would he have necessarily lifted a finger to help her.

Here, she was merely one among countless souls under his jurisdiction. The fact that she had an inkling of what he could be at his best didn't entitle her to any sort of bonus for knowing his tragic backstory.

And, if she were truly being honest, one of the draws to liking fictional characters was the romanticism inherent in contemplating someone who could never interact with her or affect her in any way. Good characters were not necessarily good people, and she knew this, had thrown it in the Undertale Group's faces in fact, but hadn't had to deal with it in any real sense. After all, of those she'd interacted with in any genuine manner, the only people she'd known as 'characters' had been from the Trek universe, and pretty much all of them had seemed to be better people than they'd been in canon.

So, her love for the character, Crowley, was still there.

But none of that translated into affection or respect for Yocriel.

And that was fine.

She wasn't here to try and redeem him, after all, she was here to protect Celadon.

Ash had always had trouble doing things for herself. Or, rather, she would easily do things for others that were very difficult to make herself do for her own sake, and thus she had something of a tendency to latch onto people.

For the past seventeen years, that person had been Sai.

And sure, Ash had had friends before, but a Designated Friend ™ who had no other real options and who couldn't abandon her? That had been new, and Ash had been bound and determined not to screw it up.

It had to have been at least a week since they'd last seen each other, and they'd parted on good terms, so Ash supposed that she had succeeded in her goal. She tried not to think about Sai, honestly, because she was trying to avoid all sources of temptation that might lead to Fusion.

So now, her fixation had moved from Sai to Celadon.

And that was different, because doing something with someone wasn't the same as doing something for them.

Sai and Ash had lived together; Celadon and Ash had spent most of their time on separate planes of consciousness.
Which honestly wasn't so bad because, sometimes, what Ash really needed was to be alone.

She'd always been fairly good at getting inside other people's heads and seeing things from their point of view.

And, on the flip side, she was easily influenced by other people, because she understood where they were coming from.

So it was nice, every now and then, to take a step back, to think things through without other people around, or at least without other people that she knew personally or had obligations towards, just to make sure that she still knew who she was.

Besides, there was another part of herself that had listened to Yocriel's declaration that he would make her suffer, and taken it as a challenge.

Not as a serious challenge, of course. Yocriel definitely annoyed her but, from what Ash could see, all the torture in his domain was psychological rather than physical. And, granted, that wasn't necessarily any less damaging than the physical stuff, but it was… cleaner, at least in Ash's opinion.

And that was most of the reason that she hadn't tried to escape. It certainly wasn't for lack of opportunity. She could have gone with Suzuki and Demiurge, after all. And Bill Cipher had shown up awhile ago, offering to make a deal, a deal which she had declined.

And, while she would have left for Sai or Celadon, Ash wouldn't leave simply for her own sake, not when she was relatively safe where she was. She was simply too risk-averse to consider it, even if it might have meant finding somewhere better.

And that, too, she was coming to realize, was just fine.

Certainly, there was opportunity cost to ignoring all these adventure hooks, but following all of them without regard for her own mental state would have led her straight down Burnout Avenue, and that wasn't a place that Ash ever wanted to revisit.

Hiding here wasn't a long-term solution; it couldn't be.

But, for now, it was something that Ash would allow herself.

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The Undertale group faced Sai, having just finished telling her she was a good person. Mica Vitrianna, thankfully, was off doing her own thing, and so Sai was able to bring the full force of her focus to bear on her current conversation.

"Have you told Ash?" Sai wanted to know.

"Yes," said Sans.

"You left her there?"

"She deserves to be where she is," said Sans.

"Look," said Sai, "I killed you all in a video game, and that means something. I acknowledge that. But making a video game to separate good people from bad people and then killing them over the results? That says something about you." Sai paused, to see what effects her words were having, before continuing.

"...and leaving her there," said Sai, "when you know what a bad environment that is, also says
Sai sighed. "I'm not saying that Ash was a saint, but she spent a large portion of her life dealing with her own anxiety and other mental issues. When someone works that hard just to keep their own head above water, it isn't fair to tell them that they're a bad person for not putting other people above their own mental or physical health."

"Being there will make her a better person," Mettaton pointed out.

"It could," Sai allowed, her voice going cold. "Many boot camps endorse similar philosophies," she continued. "In fact, the Cultivar training program..." she trailed off.

"The what?" asked Undyne, looking confused.

"If I'd consented to it," Sai mused, speaking more to herself than to any of them, "then it wouldn't have been torture."

Alphys cleared her throat. "Ms. Moore, I think you're misunderstanding something. We didn't come after you because of the genocide run. An individual genocide run, or even multiple ones, aren't indicative of an abnormally troubled soul. We came after you because of the combined genocide and pacifist runs. When you fused the timelines, our memories were fused as well. We remembered Celadon saving all of us, then killing all of us, then saving all of us again, alternating names as she alternated personalities. What worried us was that you were going back and forth all willy-nilly. We thought that we were dealing with possession.

"When we caught up to Ash in your body," Alphys continued, "we could tell that there was only one soul in the body. We thought that the soul was you and that you had killed her. That was why we executed Ash. Once she was dead, we were able to sense you and Celadon, and so went to investigate. And, to be fair, our last memories of you at that point were of you using Ash as a hostage."

Sai drew in a breath to make a retort, but, before she could, someone else spoke up.

"Excuse me," said Plaid Man, "Is there a problem here?"

Sai wasn't really sure why the guy was interfering. Her impressions of Plaid Man thus far had been that he was British, that he was intelligent, and that he was gayer than a shark in a salmon farm. She hadn't taken him very seriously and, goddamnit, she still wasn't sure what his name was...

"Who are you?" asked Undyne, possibly thinking along similar lines.

"Lazithe," he answered. "The Architect of this Neighborhood."

"What do you want?" Undyne continued.

"What I want," said Lazithe, "is for people to stop hurting each other. But, specifically, I don't appreciate you harassing my residents. So, if you're quite finished?"

After that, the Bosses ignored Sai and started arguing with Lazithe, instead. After a few minutes of increasingly escalating volume, and decreasingly comprehensible languages being bandied about, they backed off, and eventually left.

"Sorry about what I said earlier," said Sai, into the awkward silence which had followed the Undertale Bosses' departure. "I probably could have worded things better."
Lazithe shook his head. "I am grateful for your efforts to make a new resident feel welcome."

"Least I could do," said Sai, and then cast about for anything else to say, and coming up blank. Thankfully, it looked like Lazithe had another conversation topic in mind.

"Incidentally, I believe these belong to you?" Lazithe held out a box containing a large number of books and storage devices. Must've been one of those Doctor Who-esque 'bigger on the inside' storage units, Sai thought, since it didn't seem like Gem technology.

"Ah, thank you," said Sai, "but I'm in the wrong body to store them at the moment. If you wanted to hold onto them a little longer, I wouldn't mind."

Lazithe shook his head. "Any books that remain in my possession longer than two weeks turn into coffee table books. Though one of the novels was somewhat interesting. 'Good Omens,' I believe the title was. Have you read that one, recently?"

"No," said Sai, taking the box from him, affably enough. "That must have been one of Ash's books. I'm more of an anime woman, myself."

"Ah, pity," said Lazithe. "While I'm sure that more accurate versions exist, that book comes the closest I've seen to a fictionalized account of my own 'story,' and that of my colleague. But even so, the premise is strikingly different..."

The Undertale Group went back to their old timeline. Or, rather, to their new timeline, which consisted of the fused remains of their two old timelines.

…and found waiting for them the water elemental who had given them the concert recording.

"How long have you been sitting there?" asked Papyrus.

The elemental looked up. "Long enough."

After the concert had ended, Celadon had locked herself in her quarters for two days straight. She'd gotten all her news of the outside world from the kids, who had reacted to Celadon's self-imposed seclusion with increasingly dry amusement. The Crystal Gems had left not long afterwards, saying that they'd see her again soon. Now, however, that seclusion had been interrupted by a notification that Captain Solok was at the door.

"Are you well, Celadon?" he asked, once she'd let him in.

"I shared way too much personal information with way too many people, and now I am mortified," said Celadon. "How are you?"

"Fairly well," he said, and paused, before continuing. "Before anything else I must impress upon you that you are safe here. We would never ask you to host."

"Oh, I know," Celadon assured him, smiling brightly. "My chest cavity is too small. It would harm the child."

Solok looked pained. "That is not what I meant in the slightest."

"I know." Celadon sighed. "But... to know something intellectually is different from knowing it emotionally. It's hard for me not to be afraid, and I've always known that incubation was physically
impossible."

"I assure you," said Solok, "that no one is ever asked to host a Vulcan. Eggs are kept in stasis if there are no volunteers. And those who do volunteer never host more than once, not unless there are extenuating circumstances."

"Good to know," said Celadon, her expression turning somber.

"You must understand" Solok pressed, "that in situations like the one you and your components encountered, logic dictates that actualized lives not be sacrificed for potential lives. Intermediates cannot develop into viable offspring without fertilization and incubation. It is immoral to demand that of any sentient being, just as it would be immoral to demand blood transfusion or organ donation."

"Thank you," said Celadon. "If it were just me you wouldn't demand things from, I wouldn't trust you, but," she paused, "if this is how it is for everyone, well, it's a relief, to say the least."

"Stay in your quarters for as long as you feel the need," said the Captain, "but only for as long as you feel the need. As far as we are concerned, nothing has changed."

"Captain Solok?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

By the time Celadon finally emerged from her quarters, the T'Kumbra and the Manhattan were done with maintenance, and working together for a mission. Mesolite had been accepted to Starfleet Academy. Diaspore and Athena were planning to go see Vulcan. Dionysus had declared that he was taking a 'gap year' and had mapped out a schedule for visiting the galaxy's most popular tourist destinations.

However, before any of their plans for departure had been finalized, and after a particularly intense 'ion storm,' Celadon found herself called to the brig.

"Celadon reporting," she said. "What's up?"

"The ion storm has caused a rift between dimensions," said Chief Engineer L'Vor. "Several members of both crews are trapped in another world. Several members of another world's crew are trapped here, including alternate versions of your components. Did you wish to meet them?"

Celadon nodded and stepped through the doors, which closed behind her.

Thirty seconds later, the doors opened and she stepped right back out.

"Thanks," said Celadon, weakly, "I hate it."

Chapter End Notes

"Good Omens" by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett. I read that one back in High
School, when I found it mistakenly shelved in the YA section of my local library, and it was GREAT.

"Whirligig" by Paul Fleischman. It was required reading in my Freshman English Class, and I hated it so much that it formed into the basis of Ash's character.
"… and with that," finished the Celebrity Alumnus that Celadon had never heard of, "I am proud to welcome our freshman Cadets to Starfleet Academy."

Celadon applauded politely, paused to note that she was the only one doing so, then stopped, resolutely ignoring the looks that the rest of the audience was shooting her way, and kept her attention on the stage.

Then, amidst the shuffle of people leaving their seats, Celadon went to go find the kids. Athena, Diaspore, and Dionysus had insisted on sitting in the nosebleed section, despite Celadon's assurances that they could all find seats in the main section. Mesolite had sat at the very front with the rest of the incoming cadets.

When she found them again, they all stood in a group, the other three offering congratulations and other words of encouragement to Mesolite. Celadon fell in with the four of them, unobtrusively.

"… and, of course," Diaspore was saying, "I don't intend to join or start a larger Hive for at least a century. At this point, the three of you are my only Hive. If you need help, we're only a thought away."

"We may leave you by yourself," said Dionysus, "but we would never leave you alone."

"So don't be a stranger," said Athena. "And by all means use the Hive Meld to cheat on exams."

"I do not think I will," said Mesolite, "but thank you, nonetheless."

And then, it seemed, it was Celadon's turn. "I don't have good associations with the concept of formal education," she began, "primarily because I only know of it secondhand. Still, while seeking out new experiences is often frightening and painful… doing so has never failed to make me a better storyteller, and that's nothing to scoff at.

"On the more practical side of things," Celadon continued, "try not to take things too seriously. Ultimate success and failure are largely outside of your control. In Ash's experience, school was a game of reputation. You must balance your time and effort between improving your reputation among your peers and improving your rank among your class. The second has higher weight, but it is unwise to neglect the first completely. Regardless of how progressive the twenty-fourth century is, networking is universal."

"Thank you for the advice, caretaker," said Mesolite. "Live long and prosper."

"Live Long and Prosper, Mesolite," said Celadon.

With that, Mesolite held up a hand in salute, which her siblings and Celadon returned, before heading off with the rest of the cadets to finish orientation.

Next, they headed to the spaceport, to kill time until Athena and Diaspore's flight left, and Celadon spent more than a few minutes gazing wistfully into the patterns of a moving sculpture set in the center of the lounge area. She hadn't even been a parent for two years, and her kids were already flying the coop. She hoped that Mesolite would be alright. Diaspore and Athena would at least have each other, and while the Hive Meld should provide whatever emotional support Romulans claimed they didn't need, she couldn't help but worry. Things had been simpler, back on the Nostromo.
Bleaker, but undeniably simpler.

Soon, however, the boarding announcement cut through Celadon’s thoughts, and they headed off.

They stood outside the docking bay, and Celadon was trying her best not to choke up.

"Enjoy yourselves," said Dionysus. "I certainly intend to."

Something twinged in Celadon’s chest. "Your heritage probably won’t earn you any favors on Vulcan," she began, "Neither the Romulan nor the Human portions," she said. "And nothing you say or do is likely to change that. However, your heritage represents strength as well as weakness. Your genes are from Romulus, where your ancestors built an empire, and from Earth, where our ancestors followed their dreams. At a walking pace. Until they dropped from exhaustion.

"Humanoid Vulcans and Romulans are adapted for survival in a desert environment. They are hardy, but they are so because survival required it. Xenomorphs are stealth predators. And Humans? We descended from pursuit predators. You are unique, kiddos, and that means you’ll be able to fill niches that others can’t, that you’ll be able to capitalize on opportunities that others lack the skillsets to exploit."

"Thank you, Caretaker," said Diaspore, holding out a hand.

Celadon, slightly bemused, took it.

Athena and Dionysus laid theirs hands atop of Diaspore and Celadon’s clasped hands, and through the Meld, Celadon could feel Mesolite as well.

"Jolan Tru," Athena and Diaspore thought, and Dionysus and Mesolite echoed.

"Jolan Tru," whispered Celadon.

After that, they had another hour or two to kill before their own shuttle arrived.

Dionysus and Celadon took a walk around the shuttleport, idly watching through the windows as shuttles took off and landed.

"Are you sticking around to make sure I don't do anything stupid?" Celadon asked.

"I am the youngest sibling," Dionysus deflected. "It is normal for the youngest human child to delay 'leaving the nest.' As I possess human DNA, such traditions are appropriate."

Celadon said nothing, but her lips quirked upwards into a smile.

Several hours later, the two of them returned to the T’Kumbra, which had agreed to allow them to remain, for the remainder of the year at the least. Celadon suspected that this was to keep them away from the general public and under supervision.

At least, she was pretty sure that was the reason that a certain other duo had received similar treatment, Celadon mused, as they entered the mess hall.

"Celadon!" called Clara Hart, a bright smile lighting up her face.

"Hello, Abomination," said Cultivar Muscovite.
Celadon gave the best smile that she could, but it still felt tight. She didn't have the energy to deal with those two today, not after just saying goodbye to three-fourths of her children. 

"Hello, girls," Celadon said, because the universe might not care about how exhausted she was, but she wasn't about to let it win. "How have you been?"

"This dimension is…” Clara glanced at Dionysus, "…strange, but everyone here has been very kind to us."

"Yes, yes, the Vulcans are the very picture of hospitality," said Muscovite. "But we'd still like to go back to the old universe as soon as possible, you understand."

"How was the meeting with the Medusans?" asked Dionysus.

Clara shook her head. "They've been delayed. They won't get here until this afternoon. Would you care to join us?"

"Certainly," said Dionysus. "Just let us get some food, and we'll be right over."

Dionysus grabbed Celadon's wrist and pulled her along, though he let go after a few steps to turn his attention to the replicator.

"You're infuriated," he observed.

"I am," said Celadon.

"You are aware, of course," said Dionysus, "that this is most likely because those two are, in a sense, you, and you see in them your own flaws magnified?"

"…also, possibly because of some internalized misogyny," Celadon admitted. "That'd be from Ash. Her society tended to disparage teenage girls and their interests."

Celadon shook her head before continuing. "Regardless of my feelings, my hands are tied."

Dionysus nodded. "Emotional beings typically do not change because of negative reinforcement, but rather because of positive reinforcement. But more than that, it is important to be kind to people regardless of whether or not you like their personalities. And it is also important to be kind to yourself."

Celadon shrugged. "I'm not sure that we need it. Either of us."

At Dionysus' questioning glance, she added, "I don't know how, but those two are canon. And we, I, am not." She shook her head. "All this time, I thought I was derivative, but that's not it. Sai, Ash, Celadon. We're not derivatives, we're integrals. We are simple archetypes made more complex through extrapolation."

"I am unconvinced that keeping the two of them in the dark about that fact is the best course of action," said Dionysus.

Celadon sighed. "You're not doing it wrong if no one knows what you're doing. You're not lying if you don't even know what the truth is supposed to be."

Unwilling to discuss things further, Celadon ordered a Tholian dish and a glass of water.

They made their way back to Clara and Muscovite's table.
"Ah," said Clara, politely, "That looks…" Dionysus' dish squirmed. "… good! That looks good! Good choices all around!"

Muscovite snorted. "Clara, your obsession with being liked is as transparent as it pathetic."

Dionysus and Celadon exchanged a glance.

Celadon shrugged, and tipped her glass over her dish. The sodium ignited and skittered across the plate, smoking off hydrogen as it did so. She popped a piece into her mouth and chewed, thoughtfully.

"Weird question," said Celadon, "But are you dead souls reanimated who were sent back to the world of the living by Ma'at, the Egyptian Goddess of Balance?"

"How exactly do you know this?" asked Muscovite, looking suspicious.

Celadon blinked. "You mean, no one told you? You don't recognize me?"

"Muscovite folded her arms across her chest. "Should we?"

"I am Celadon, the fusion of Ash Hughes and Saino Moore. I used to be you. Or at least, different versions of you."

Clara blinked "You're what?"

"Celadon? My Muscovite used the PZ73 Virus on her Clara, and this made them compatible enough to allow for fusion, even if there was destructive interference."

"What?" said Muscovite, looking disturbed.

"Normal fusions are more than the sum of their parts. I am less. Shorter, lacking some of their skills and memories. I have my own unique attributes, true, but I am less than what fusion should be."

Celadon had never said such a thing, would never have said such a thing, to Ash and Sai, but to Clara and Muscovite? No reason not to be honest.

"… but I do remember enough to know how they met," Celadon continued. "After death, the two of them had their hearts weighed. Clara was told that her heart was light. Muscovite was told that her heart was heavy. Neither of these descriptors fit their personalities or experiences. So, I was thinking. It's possible that the gods weighed the wrong hearts. Maybe there was some other Clara out there, who was told that her heart was heavy, when it was actually light. Maybe there was some other Muscovite, who was told that her heart was light, when it was actually heavy."

She shrugged. "I don't have any proof, but I figured I'd at least mention the theory."

She looked up to see that Clara was crying, and immediately panicked. "No, wait, I didn't mean to upset you—"

"You didn't," Muscovite assured her, looking quite pleased, herself. "You didn't upset her in the slightest."

The Medusans were said to be among the most sublime thinkers in the galaxy, but their appearances tended to be flashy. As in 'seizure-inducing-for-most-humanoids' flashy. Thus, they wore 'appearance generators' when interacting with such species as a common courtesy.
Ash and Sai had met a few of them before, but neither had ever been the focus of their interest for any significant period of time.

Celadon was finding the Medusans… intense.

Thankfully, their attention was elsewhere at the moment. Unfortunately, that 'elsewhere' was at Clara and Muscovite, whose favorite topic of conversation was—surprise, surprise—themselves. Dionysus was off hanging out with one of his friends on the Manhattan, so Celadon was, unfortunately, going it alone.

"I mean," said Clara, with a self-deprecating laugh. "I spent most of my life reading about other people, fictional or otherwise. It's like I was just passing the time until I graduated college and my real life could begin… and then," she shrugged, "it never did."

"That is… deeply unfortunate," said one of the Medusans, looking desolate. "I am sorry."

Clara preened at the attention. "Not your fault," she assured him. It's all water under the bridge, at this point," added the human. "It's Muscovite who should be sorry for dragging me here."

Muscovite hissed. "I did not give my life to save your worthless waterlogged planet in order to be disrespected like this."

Her alt-components—and the Medusans as well—they were all so… sincere. It was giving Celadon hives. It was like no one had ever stomped on their dreams, like none of them had ever been crushed beneath the boot-heel of existential despair. Which, come to think of it, maybe they hadn't been? Those were probably less universal experiences than Celadon was assuming, and possibly not things that she should be viewing as developmental milestones.

And, yeah, Ash had been a lonely kid, and Sai had sacrificed herself to save Earth then misdirected the hell out of it whenever anyone asked, but they'd both moved past, well, their pasts.

Or was that moving past it? Celadon was too close to the issue. How would she be able to tell if Ash and Sai had been refusing to deal with the past, or if these two jokers were simply refusing to move on?

"And how are you?" asked a Medusan. Celadon's immediate thought was that his name as 'Dagon' but dismissed that as probably wrong. Ash was horrible with faces, and Sai was awful with names. Celadon herself was nearly face-blind.

"I'm dying, Squidward," she answered, in the most deadpan voice she could summon.

"His name is Dagor," said another Medusan scientist.

"No," said Dagor, his eyes lighting up. "No, I like this name! 'Squidward'! This shall be my name from now on!"

Celadon groaned. "Please, don't?"

"Thank you, Celadon!" said Dag—said Squidward.

"Yes, now we're done with chit chat!" said—Celadon wanted to say this one's name was Felicity? "Time to get down to business!" The Medusan finished.

"Right," said Celadon. "How can we help?"
"Help?" said Squidward. "Ah, no you seem to have misunderstood! This is for us to help you!"

"…huh," said Celadon.

"We wish to share with you the research done using the data you brought to this universe," continued Felicity (?).

"Oh, well, thank you," she said. It was still deeply weird to Celadon that information was so open here. Sai’s colleagues had always had a sink-or-swim approach to mentorship, and to life skills in general.

"Not at all!" chorused the scientists, as they broke out the charts and whiteboards.

"Now," began Felicity, "Alternate universes tend to occur in clusters. The frequency of which can be calculated using a standard resonance…"

A thought suddenly occurred to Celadon.

"Hey," Celadon muttered to Clara and Muscovite, "how did you find this universe if you've never fused?"

The two of them exchanged an uneasy glance.

"Deal with Bill Cipher," they said, in unison.
"Oh, golly, gee, gloriosky!" said Celadon, as the turbolift doors whooshed open, and she stepped onto the bridge of the T'Kumbra. "Here I am, the Littlest Elf in all of Starfleet, only three-and-a-half feet tall..."

Captain Solok raised an eyebrow. "You are perfectly aware that you need not help, if this makes you uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable?" Celadon repeated, her voice incredulous. "I am in fucking agony. But knowing that it's happening—without knowing the specifics—would be worse."

"What are you doing in the command seat, Clara?" Science Officer Xanatos was asking, across the room, and Celadon's face twisted in distaste.

"The Captain told me to," answered Clara Hart from where she sat, and Celadon facepalmed.

"Flawlessly logical," said Xanatos, "I admire your mind."

Celadon's fingers twitched, but she managed to restrain herself, and folded her arms across her chest.

"Excuse me, but what exactly is your problem?" asked Clara, as she caught sight of Celadon's less-than-enthused expression.

"Your self-awareness," said Celadon, "or rather, your lack thereof."

"Do not worry about her," said Sarissa to Clara. "She is extremely superstitious, and today is ostensibly an inauspicious one. Her negativity has no logical source, I assure you."

Mollified by Sarissa's words, Clara turned back to pushing random buttons on the command chair's armrest.

Science Officer Sarissa turned back to Celadon. "You have professed willingness to tear yourself in two for the sake of your components," she began, "yet you balk at the thought of pulling yourself together for the same reason."

Celadon shrugged—projecting an aura of sullen misery—but said nothing.

"Clara," drawled Muscovite after a few minutes, breaking the silence. She stood at Science Officer Sarissa's usual station, which said Vulcan had vacated in favor of mingling/slacking off. "...we're approaching Rigel Thirty-seven," Muscovite finished.

"Captain Solok?" said Clara.

"Clara, Muscovite, Xanatos, Sarissa, Dionysus with me," Solok ordered. "Celadon, I leave you in charge while we are gone."

Celadon whipped her head around and glared daggers at his retreating back, until the turbolift doors had closed behind him.

"He can't be serious," said Celadon, once the landing party was gone.
"He is not," First Officer Saavik assured her, as she took the command chair. "But if you truly do not enjoy his jokes, then I would suggest altering your own reactions to be less… comical."

Celadon snorted. "You know, I've never understood just how a species—which views emotions as superfluous—manages to get so much mileage out of sheer, unadulterated snark."

"And spite," added Saavik. "Do not forget spite."

Celadon fell straight back onto the floor with a thud and just stared up at the ceiling. "Hate," she said, "Let me tell you about how I've come to hate you."

"A most illogical sentiment," said CMO T'Pal, who must have arrived on the bridge while Celadon was being melodramatic.

"By the way," T'Pal continued, "will you be joining the rest of us in the Collective?"

Celadon sighed. "Well, I certainly won't be joining Dionysus in Le Resistance."

She held out an arm, not even bothering to raise her head. "Hit me up."

A hypospray pressed against the inside of Celadon's wrist. It hissed, indicating that it had done its work.

"These nanites will set up a local, temporary instance of the Borg Collective, which our galaxy's resident Hive Queen was kind enough to supply us with," T'Pal told them.

"Well, the sooner I lose my free will the better," was all Celadon had to say on the matter.

Later, down in Engineering, staring idly into the Warp Core, Celadon examined the Borg implants in her right arm with interest. The nanites had put up a good fight, but they were nothing that Sai couldn't have dismantled in her sleep. She was saving some of the more interesting code for use in her own viruses, but overall it was nothing to write home about.

As she tried to decide whether it would be worth the spectacle of going down to the mess hall to snag some food, several people transported in using Borg technology. Celadon didn't bother looking up, until one of them addressed her directly.

"Caretaker," said Dionysus, "The rest of the landing party is coming through, so kindly either hide or join us."

'Fine,' thought Celadon, tuning back into the Collective Consciousness and falling into step with the other four: they were Dionysus, Sarissa, Xanatos, and Solok, she noted, having made no effort to identify them before that point.

As it turned out, Celadon had moved just in time, for the next moment saw the doors opening and Clara and Muscovite freezing in shock.

"We are the Borg," they recited together. "You will be assimilated, resistance is futile."

"Oh no," whispered Clara. "No, Di, they can't have gotten you, too..."

Muscovite clamped a hand onto Clara's arm. "Mourn later, run now!"

"Worst. Birthday. Ever!" screeched Clara, as the doors closed again.
And then they were gone.

After a moment, Xanatos left as well, but the other four seemed in no hurry to leave Engineering.

'You know,' thought Dionysus. 'I'm rather fond of these implants. Perhaps I'll keep them.'

'I would not rush into such a decision were I you,' cautioned Sarissa. 'Most Romulans do not enjoy prolonged time in the Borg Collective.'

'I'll do my research before committing to anything, of course,' thought Dionysus. 'Thank you for your concern, Science Officer.'

'At least one of us is able to benefit from this experience,' thought Solok. 'I seem to be back to manipulating children on the orders of the High Council.'

'I'm certain that you'll survive,' thought Sarissa, without much sympathy.

'Yes,' thought Solok, with a meaningful glance at Celadon, '...and that just might be the most damning portion of this whole experience.'

'...wait,' thought Celadon, as something pinged in her memory, '...that was from Deep Space Nine! Sisko's speech! from 'It's Only a Paper Moon!' she finished, glaring and leveling a finger at Solok in accusation.

'I believe you mean "In the Pale Moonlight,"' thought Solok.

'Probably,' Celadon agreed, waving her hand in dismissal, breaking her earlier aura of menace, 'but still. You're comparing lying and spying to murder and conspiracy?

'Most of said "spying" was done on you and your components,' thought Solok. 'For months, your every word and reaction have been recorded. This was a violation of privacy, of one of the fundamental rights of sentient. The fact that you do not view it as such is likely due to twenty-first century earth governments—and timeless gem empires—doing the same to your components. And those are not peers that I would enjoy finding myself grouped with.

'And now,' he continued, 'here I am, railroading the actions and restricting the choices, not only of guests, but of children. I am strongly considering resigning my Captaincy.'

'Look, Captain Solok,' thought Celadon, massaging her temples, 'it's not that big of a deal. I may not like them, but my alt-components are tough. This isn't the kind of thing that would do them any lasting harm.'

'That is not the point,' returned Solok. 'Your societies and ours cannot be compared when it comes to morality. I say this not out of arrogance, but as simple fact. It would be like comparing a Parrises Squares match with the human sport of Racket Ball. Politics and history have made the one infinitely more complex and nuanced than the other.'

'The sports analogy is an interesting one,' Celadon acknowledged. 'Since sports is a field where technology plays a huge role. The Olympians of ancient Greece could never be set against the Olympians of Ash's time, and not just because of the time disparity. Athletic footwear, nutrition science, even exercise culture would mean the two are incomparable by all but the broadest of metrics. I suppose I can see how systems of morality would undergo similar evolution. Your legal systems alone must be a nightmare to navigate.'

'You are not wrong,' thought Sarissa.
'And I mean,' Celadon continued, 'I can see the Greek Olympian not giving a shit about the concept of, say, blood doping, when it would get you barred from any Olympics Ash had ever seen. But, Captain Solok, I would consider another factor if I were you.'

'I, Celadon placed a hand on her chest, 'am still undecided on whether or not I am a Mary Sue. If you suffer because of your actions towards me, then, as far as I'm concerned, that will count as proof positive. Because the Sue is a vengeful creature, and those who slight her will feel the wrath of the story. Think twice before playing into the hands of fate. Especially since spying such as that which you did on me, and cons such as this one we are running now, are a staple of fiction. And I suspect that all of us still have quite a ways to go before any of us manage to truly break free from canon.'

'I will consider your words, Celadon,' allowed Solok, though he didn't sound convinced in the slightest.

'They're on the Manhattan now,' interjected Sarissa, who must have been consulting the with rest of their Collective while Celadon and Solok argued, and Dionysus watched in silence. 'It should only be a matter of time before Clara and Muscovite find the counter-virus in their sickbay,' Sarissa concluded.

Celadon sighed. "I'm both unsurprised and unimpressed that Muscovite can't break the Borg nanites on her own," she said, switching from telepathic to vocal communication.

Sarissa looked up from the Padd she was consulting in interest. "I'm surprised that you can, young Celadon," she said, doing the same.

Celadon scoffed. "A thousand years of experimentation and two doctorates say otherwise."

Later, at the ceremonial dinner held in honor of her alt-components managing to save both the T'Kumbra and the Manhattan from the Borg Collective, Celadon sat with Dionysus, and the both of them in turn sat across from Clara and Muscovite. It was almost time to tie the bow on this whole gift of an affair, but Celadon still found her mind wandering.

For one thing, she still had no solid leads on retrieving her components. This plan that they were executing was one which might aid in that goal, of course, but success was still far from guaranteed.

Sai and Ash were already dead—had been dead for weeks already—so things don't look incredibly hopeful on that front. Really though, what other choice did she have but to keep trying?

Things didn't always go the way that they should, and it was important to exhaust the plausible before she started in on any of her more wild hypotheses.

And, regardless, her components would want Celadon to look after their alternates, of that she was certain.

Attending this dinner might not have been Celadon's first choice on how she wanted to spend this evening, but without a doubt it was what she should be doing.

All that remained was what lay before her.

Solok was just getting up to speak.

Resolution crystallizing within mind, Celadon leaned forward and caught Muscovite and Clara's eyes.
across the table.

"I don't like you anywhere near as much as I like my own components," she began, "but it can't be denied that you've both genuinely grown as people."

She turned to the human. "Clara, you're more than just a tragic placeholder."

She looked to the Gem, "And Muscovite, you're more than just a rehashed 'Avatar' ripoff. Or, I suppose that would be a 'Dances with Wolves' ripoff, wouldn't it?"

She shook her head, recognizing that she was digressing. "Regardless," Celadon continued, "I just wanted to let you two know that, what's about to happen next? I'm aware of it, I've already been judged, several times, and I want you to consider this my gift to you. All right?"

"What?" said Clara, in confusion. Muscovite just blinked.

Celadon's only response was to raise a finger to press, briefly, against her lips, before turning back to watch Solok, studiously ignoring the two of them.

She wasn't entirely sure that Ash and Sai would have agreed with her statements, but she was absolutely certain that both of them would have scorned any favor that Clara and Muscovite tried to do for them, so it was all the same in the end, she supposed.

"Once again, the Federation thanks you for your heroism," said Captain Solok, inclining his head to Clara Hart and Cultivar Muscovite. "From this day forward," Solok continued, "the T'Kumbra shall hold a small ceremony each year to commemorate this day."

Clara and Muscovite smiled, touched by the sentiment.

The Vulcans applauded, politely.

And then, reality ground to an abrupt and stuttering halt.

Atemakhem rowed atop the waters, trawling down the river in search of lost souls.

A hand broke the surface and latched onto the side of his boat.

The fingers tightened their grip and, a moment later, a human was thrown aboard, where she proceeded to hang over the side and cough up water.

The next second, a gem had pulled herself up onto the vessel as well.

"Pharaoh," said Muscovite, with a nod. "Fancy seeing you again."

"Ladies," said Atem, steering back into the main current to speed their progress. "How were your lives?"

"We'll find out in a moment I suppose," said Muscovite, while Clara continued to hack and wheeze. "I have absolutely no clue how I even died this time, so I couldn't begin to comment on how I lived."

Atem blinked. "You've never lived to the end of your timeline before?"

Muscovite did a double-take. "Timelines end?"

"When their stories do," said Atem, with a nod.
"… guess that explains why I never lived to see it," croaked Clara.

Muscovite grabbed her arm and helped her sit up. "Nor I," she agreed. "While the villain typically dies near the end of the tale, usually there is at least an epilogue after the final battle. And, of course, the slaughtered lamb rarely lives to see even as far as act two…"

Here, Muscovite paused. "We died in a universe not our own. Do you mean to say that all universes exist merely to tell stories?"

"All universes that I've ever known of at least," Atem confirmed. "That's not to say that there aren't universes full of audiences watching our stories as they unfold, but, if such things exist, then they certainly aren't accessible by any means that I know of."

"Odd," said Muscovite, "But I find myself less surprised than I probably should be."

They continued to catch up and make small talk with their guide, but all too soon it was time to face the figurative music.

Clara and Muscovite found themselves walking down the hall towards judgment, clasping hands as they entered the chamber to stave off their own nervousness.

"Clara Hart and Cultivar Muscovite," said Thoth, in a warmer voice than either of them had ever heard him use. "Welcome back. It's been quite the journey for you two, hasn't it?"

The two of them nodded, not quite sure what to make of their reception.

"As Gods," began Anubis, "our primary purpose is to keep harmful influences contained. By ensuring that troublemakers do not retain memories over multiple iterations and by keeping manipulators quarantined from those that they might harm." He smiled at them, beatifically. "All of these safeguards the two of you circumvented with your little 'fusion' stunt."

"As for what effects this has had… well, we're about to find out, aren't we?" said Ma'at, as she placed Muscovite's gem on the scale.

It balanced with the feather.

She removed it and replaced it with Clara's heart.

It balanced as well.

Ma'at held a heart in each hand as she faced them.

"You have been good for each other," she said. "We pair together people who know each other as fiction, and you'd be surprised how often neither of them tells the other of this fact: you two told each other immediately. Not only that, but you collaborated to tell people in your universes that their lives were fictional. Muscovite with Clara's family, and Clara with the Crystal Gems."

"And then, when you discovered fusion, and escaped the walls around your reality, you proceeded to spread the gospel of fictional reality to no less than a hundred other universes. Granted, this seemed to be done out of a sort of game-breaking 'I can therefore I must' sentiment, but nonetheless, you've shown more maturity than we ever would have guessed, given your backgrounds. Thus, we judge you not only as worthy to keep your memories when the timeline rolls over, but to cross over to other universes within this branch of reality. Keep it up and you could be trusted to leave your own branch within the century."
From up on his throne, Osiris inclined his head. "Have a nice life, Ash Hughes, Saino Moore."

On the floor, Ammit rumbled in agreement.

And then, Clara Hart and Cultivar Muscovite began to fade away.

As they did, they exchanged a confused glance. The last thing either of them saw was the utterly gobsmacked expression on the other's face.

And then they were gone.

The End

(of Part 3)

Chapter End Notes

There'll be a lore dump later, to better explain most of this. In the meantime, bonus points for anybody who catches the references. About the only obvious ones were the Trekkie's Tale quotes in the first section and the hatred quote from Harlan Ellison's 'I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream' in italics.

Also, part four should have at least seven chapters, and FGOS will probably be at least thrity-seven chapters in total, when complete.
Chapter Notes

Spoilers for discussion of the 'Young Wizard's' Series by Diane Duane, up through Book 8 at least.

Also spoilers for Gravity Falls. More so than usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 4: You Ain't Gonna Break My Heart in Two

Ash found herself playing yet another round of 'dream, hallucination, or gaslighting?' and, quite frankly, she had no clue what the hell was going on.

One moment, she'd been zoning out in the Caverns; the next, she'd found herself in the living room of her childhood home, and in her original body, which couldn't possibly have been older than ten.

Her first instinct was to go with 'dream.' Confirming that choice would be time-consuming, however. Despite what Hollywood might show, Ash had never found pain to be a reliable indicator of whether or not she was dreaming, nor was realizing that she might be dreaming a definite thing, either.

The most reliable marker that Ash had ever found was actually the fact that she never slept in her dreams. Thus, if she wanted to check if she was dreaming, she'd wait until she slept and woke up again, and thus recalibrated her brain as to what was real and what was dream.

And so, for the moment, she'd focus on the basement, which was just as she remembered it: the metal pole in the middle of the room that went 'thonk' when you ran into it; the door to the laundry room by the stairs, which in winter smelled faintly of what Ash had, eventually, learned was natural gas; the green carpet squares on the floor, arranged into checkerboard grain pattern; the bookshelves built into the wall…

Ash walked over to the bookshelves, snagging a chair along the way in order to reach the highest shelves, and pulled out a battered paperback copy of Catch 22 by Joseph Heller, one of her favorite novels of all time.

It had been so long since she'd read a paper book rather than an ebook. Space requirements in Sai's gem had meant that everything had been digitized, save for their constantly-in-need-of-replenishment collection of e-readers.

Ash shoved the chair back to the card table and took to the stairs. It was still early morning, judging by the angle of the light shining through the sidelight windows. Ash filed this fact away as she turned to climb the second half of the split-level stairs, glancing up at the unlit pendant light, remembering many helium balloons lost to the vaulted ceiling what seemed like (and was) a lifetime ago.

Turning into the living room, Ash plopped herself onto the couch cushion closest to the front window, and cracked open the book to try and find her favorite passage, the one with psychologist and all the hospital bed-swapping. Quite frankly, that joke alone was one of her favorites in all of fiction.
While most people took the first exposition of the whole 'Catch 22' concept as the book's most iconic scene (when it wasn't even a full explanation of the term in-universe), well Ash would have advocated for the final scene, instead: the stark imagery of a bleak situation, unchanged save for a single positive realization, which cast a retroactive beacon of hope all throughout the whole convoluted, clusterfuck of a narrative. A realization made all the more powerful by the negative realization in the earlier hospital scene…

There was a sharp intake of breath, and Ash looked up from her book.

"Hi, Mommy, Hi Daddy," she said, putting aside the book and smiling as she spoke. Ash hadn't seen her family since before she'd met Sai, though they'd exchanged the occasional letter.

"No," said her mom, her voice steely and hostile. "We're not doing this again."

Ash blinked. "What?" A bolt of unease shot through her. Sai had always spoken fondly of Ash's family. Had all that been a lie?

"Get out," said her dad.

Ash's eyes widened. This wasn't a joke; both of them were dead serious.

Ash slipped off the couch.

Walked down the stairs.

Toed on her shoes, then glanced backwards to confirm that her parents still looked furious.

Ash swallowed, to try and press down on her rising emotions, before pulling open the door and rushing out.

Ash's steps slowed as she made her way down the street…

…around the corner…

…and into a bathroom stall at the local park.

"What the fuck," whispered Ash, tears streaming down her face as her breathing began to hitch.
"What the actual fuck."

---

Ash's recent experiences with confrontation had left her better off than her original eight-year-old self would have been in this situation, but the humiliation of being rejected by her own family still stung. Especially when it was for something she'd never done in the first place.

And, come to think of it, what the hell had Sai done?

This could still be a dream, but Ash was upset enough that a normal dream would probably have had her tossing and turning and getting closer to wakefulness by now.

Was Sai secretly evil, like Maat had said?

Or wait, no. The one who was secretly evil had been Sai's counter… part.

"Holy Hell," said Ash. "It's Karma."

Or, rather, karma misattributed.
Okay, new working theory: she was currently dealing with the fallout of whatever it was that Evil Sai had done to Ash's family.

Assuming this wasn't a dream, that brought up the possibility that Sai might currently be dealing with whatever it was that Good Ash had done to the Crystal Gems.

…and God only knew where Celadon was. Hopefully still on the T'Kumbra, but that was, honestly, neither here nor there.

Beyond that, she remained utterly uncertain on what to do about 'her' parents.

Ash knew a lot of useless trivia, but she sure as heck didn't know how to fix a broken relationship. Especially when it wasn't her fault.

…though, hold the phone, that was a quote from something, wasn't it? Diane Duane, maybe? Wait, yeah, the Young Wizards Series, from the first book!

…well, no, not the first book, the first book that Ash had read, so actually it was book four.

'The Wizard's Dilemma,' she recalled. It had had something to do with conflict resolution, but she couldn't remember the specifics, only that it had struck a chord with her, once upon a time.

Well, wasn't she in her own universe again? Or somewhere close enough, at least. Assuming it had been published already, she could just… go the library… and check it out? No more trying to remember things she'd read years ago off the top of her heard and getting them wrong half the time? Holy hell, this was great!

She blew her nose, splashed some water on her face, then stared on her trek down to the local library. Ash couldn't remember if she'd had a card at this age or not, but she shouldn't need one just to browse.

After entering the Library, and ambling back to the Young Adult section, Ash checked the shelves. The A's trailed off in to B's, C's, Danhurst, Deaton, Dossa, Duggar… wait, too far. Ash looked back at the previous shelf. Dunbar, Dulcet, Duane. Ha! Found it.

Ash frowned. Nope, no 'Wizard's Dilemma.' Other books from the series were there, though, and Ash snagged a copy of 'High Wizardry,' to read if she couldn't find her first choice, and headed over to the plastic articulated bookcases that held the paperbacks. Those were organized only by the first letter of the author's last name, and so Ash was forced to read each title individually, a much more time-consuming venture.

A venture which was rewarded, however, when Ash pulled a Copy of 'A Wizard's Dilemma' from the shelf.

Okay, so apparently it was actually book five in the series, not four, and was called 'The Wizard's Dilemma' not 'A Wizard's Dilemma,' but still. Close enough.

Ash then walked back towards the nonfiction section, where she thought she remembered a few hidden tables.

Success! They were unoccupied, and Ash settled in to read, trying to pull the details from her mind. It had been in the first half of the book, during the early exposition, she was almost certain. The plot had involved the protagonist's mother dying of cancer, which couldn't be cured, even though the protagonist was a wizard.
'Nita' Ash recalled, scanning through the book, that had been the protagonist's name.

Such a plotline made sense, Ash supposed, as she went back to scanning the text, because it would have been cruel to bring a real world issue, like cancer, into a fantasy series, and then treat it frivolously or as not a big deal, when it affected so many people in real life.

Anyway, Ash went with her tried and true method of skimming the dialogue and italicized thoughts, and skipping over the chapters not from Nita's point of view. It didn't actually take Ash long to find the passage that she was searching for:

"If you had a fight with somebody . . ." Ash read, "and they were incredibly wrong, and you were right . . . what would you do?"

"Apologize immediately..." answered the protagonist's mother, "Unless it's about a life-and-death issue, why make a point of being right? Of getting all righteous about it? All it does is make people less likely to listen to you. Even more so if they're close to you."

Ash closed the book and pushed it away. Well, that wasn't what she'd wanted to hear, but it was pretty straightforward. It was clear what was needed next.

And Ash was absolutely not ready to face it.

Instead, she opened High Wizardry and skipped to the back to find the segment about the race of sentient computers. She'd always liked redemption stories, and hadn't liked the implication in later books that the Lone Power's redemption in this particular book hadn't lasted. Then again, she'd never actually gotten around to reading a 'Wizard of Mars.' Maybe that would offer some sort of closure on the matter? Though it almost certainly hadn't been published yet. She'd thought she'd seen 'A Wizard Alone' back among the hardbacks. She thought that that one had been published in 2006? Maybe? It gave her a rough idea of her own arrival in the timeline, anyway.

Ash wanted to fix whatever bad blood existed between herself and her parents, but she wasn't sure whether the relationship was even salvageable.

Her family was important to her, in any universe, but not knowing what had caused the rift in the first place, she couldn't know they'd ever trust her again in this one, even if she apologized.

Of course, if she did apologize for something that she hadn't done, then that would mean giving up on honesty, and then that would doom her relationship in its own way, because honesty was necessary in any truly strong bond, Ash thought.

But then again, things were already ruined and, at this point? Even a partial reconciliation might be worth it.

The sunbeams that had slanted across the table had disappeared as the sun rose higher. It was probably getting close to noon. The library was open until nine, but nine in the evening would give her fewer resources for solving her problems than, say, one in the afternoon.

And she'd done enough hiding, already, back in the caverns.

Ash left her books on the reshelving cart, and started the slow walk back to her parents' house.

When she got there, she rang the doorbell with shaking hands.

There was no answer.
The cars were both in the driveway, so it was fairly obvious that Ash was being ignored.

Well, fine. No one could say she hadn't tried.

Ash didn't feel like playing the human trafficking lottery, so she figured her best bet was to go down to the police station and tell them that her parents had kicked her out of the house. She didn't particularly want to roll the dice that was entering the foster system, either, but it couldn't be helped. She didn't particularly know where the police department was in relation to herself, but she figured if she was obvious enough in front of local business owners, they'd eventually call the cops to 'help' the 'lost child.'

"Hey, 'Hart,'" called Bill Cipher's voice from somewhere behind her. "Wanna make a deal?"

"Okay, sure," said Ash, having no better options. "What is it?"

At the silence that followed her answer, Ash turned around to see a blond man wearing an eyepatch and an uncertain expression.

"Neon, are you all right?"

That was an odd nickname, but Ash brushed it off with a shrug. "Karma's a bitch and all that. Nothing I haven't dealt with before. How's tricks with you, Cipher?"

He blinked. "It's Cypress."

"Oh," said Ash. Then, realization hit. "Oh! You're from a different universe! Or, probably I am, now that I think about it."

She stuck out a hand. "Clara Hart. Pen name, 'Ash Hughes.' Associate of Saino Moore. I comprise one half of the fusion 'Celadon,' and am currently inhabiting my own eight-year-old body."

"Bill Cypress," he said, shaking her hand. "Owner and operator of Camp Cypress. Currently hiring Camp Counselors. Gig covers room and board and pays minimum wage. Interested?"

Ash hummed. "Well—considering I was just kicked out of my own house—room, board, and minimum wage sound fantastic. When do I start?"

Cypress frowned. "Neon—Hart, I'm not gonna leave you out on the streets. Ain't safe for a kid out here." He waved a hand. "Car's this way."

It might not have been such a good idea to trust him, but Ash followed, anyway. "So why is 'Neon' your nickname for Evil Sai?" she asked, not able to think of a better ice-breaker.

"It's short for 'Neon Genocide Evangeline,'" said Cypress. "I never could get much of a read on her." He paused. "Incidentally, who's 'Cipher'?"

"Bill Cipher," supplied Ash. "Dream Demon whose avatar is a triangle in a top hat. Kind of reminiscent of the 'eye of providence'? He helped me and Sai orient ourselves after we'd died. The terms of his deals were usually pretty reasonable, and he wasn't openly hostile, which put him head and shoulders above everybody else, honestly. His nickname for me is 'Pollyanna.' For Sai it's 'Glitterdust,' and Celadon's 'Vase Face.'"

They reached a beat-up old Jeep, and Ash went around to the passenger's side. "So, where's 'Camp Cypress' located?"
"Oregon."

Ash paused. "Isn't that, like, two days of driving?"

"In three dimensions, sure."

Three hours later, they drove beneath a wooden sign; the words 'Camp Cypress' were carved into it in block-letters.

After they'd stopped Ash uncurled from the fetal position, pulling the chest strap of the seatbelt back over her head before unbuckling it, though she made no move to open the door, instead staring straight ahead, unseeing.

"I have no idea what I just saw," she announced, "and I have absolutely no desire to ever find out. 'See Something, Say Nothing, Drink to Forget.'"

Cypress rolled his eyes. "Honestly, Hart, you're not actually ten."

"I am forty," agreed Ash, "and that's still forty years too young to see any of that."

"Well, fine, I can take the long way back at the end of summer."

Ash stopped. That didn't fit with her mental model of Cipher. Apparently, Cypress' differences were more than just surface-level.

"Nah," she said, exiting the car and stretching her legs. "I'm just being overdramatic. That was unsettling, but definitely worth it for the time saved. Thanks for the offer, though."

As she looked up and saw a group of people approaching them, curiously.

"Guys, this is Ash Hughes," said Cypress, as he leaned back against the front of the car. "She is human and the body she's inhabiting is entirely her own."

"Nice to meet you," said Ash. From the sound of things, these people had probably had bad experiences with Evil Sai, but they were at least willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, so she'd take it.

"This here's the Co-owner of the camp, Stanley Pines," said Cypress, indicating a guy wearing both flip-flops a fez. "These two over here are your co-counselors, Melody and Soos," here, he indicated a peppy girl and a guy with a zoned-out expression, "...and the rest are the kids for the season."

The kids waved, nervously, and Ash decided to start off the introductions. "Hi," she said. "I'm Ash Hughes. I'm technically forty years old and on my third life. My first life I died at twenty, my second at eighteen or so. The rest of the time was spent in various limbos. I've been in this timeline for all of a day, so we'll see if I can beat my previous record, I guess. I… don't know how many of you remember the previous timeline, but I wasn't here for it. My best guess is that my body had been taken over by Cultivar Muscovite: an evil version of my friend, Saino Moore."

Then Pines started speaking. Oh, Ash realized, Pines and Cypress. Theme naming. That probably accounted for the difference in name between 'Cypress' and 'Cipher.'

"Okay," said Stanley, to the group of them, once they'd finished. "First order of business: my stick-
The two counselors, Melody and Zeus, Ash thought their names were, looked a bit skeptical, but they softened when the kids all cheered in enthusiasm. Ash shrugged. The mention that Cypress was 'disguised' was worth noting, but beyond that, Ash didn't have a horse in this race.

There were a few more discussions, that apparently involved dividing the kids up into 'teams,' which Ash wasn't sure she completely followed, but they were soon done with that. Zeus—Seuss, as it turned out—and Melody showed her the counselor's cabin, where they all had their own rooms. There was no central air, but there were also no bedbugs, so Ash would take what she could get.

She found a bag of clothes and toiletries on her bed. The shirts were all too big, and the pants were baggy drawstring affairs, but still, it was more than she'd anticipated.

When Stanford Pines arrived, the next day, everyone was sitting around the campfire, Bill Cypress not even bothering to look human, but rather wearing the triangle-in-a-top-hat form that Ash was more familiar with.

"Stanley," said Stanford, carefully. "What exactly is that?"

"Oh, right," said Stanley, "Introductions. Everyone, this is my brother, Ford. Now go around in a circle and introduce yourselves."

They started to, but Ford interrupted. "No, that thing, right there! Can you not see it?"

Stanley followed his pointing. "Wait, you mean Bill? You guys met years ago."

"Bill Cypress?"

"Actually," said the triangle, "it's Bill Cipher. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"The last time I saw you," said Stanford, "you were human."

"No," said Bill, "I looked human. World of difference there, Pinetree." He floated over, hand extended and aflame.

Ford flinched back.

"Whoops, sorry!" said Bill, "Old habits."

"What exactly are you doing with my brother?" asked Stanford, wary and reserved.

"Me and Stanley?" said Bill. "Oh, we go way back. Where do you think he got his treasure maps?"

Stanford grimaced. "Lee, tell me you didn't."

Stanley rubbed his chin in consideration. "Well, I could tell you that I didn't trade away irreplaceable years of my life for money, but I'd be lying."

"Why are you still around?" Stanford demanded of Bill.
Bill shrugged. "Still some debt remaining between Stan-ster and me. No skin off my nose, though. Things'll wind up even sooner or later."

"I think I've heard of you," said Stanford. "Bill Cipher, the dream demon. I don't know what kind of hold you have over Stanley, but I'm going to break it. I don't know what you're doing with all these children, but I'm going to stop you." He turned to address them. "You don't have to stay here, Children! It's not safe!"

He was booed by all the kids. And Seuss.

"I'll figure out what's going on here!" Stanford announced. "And I'll put a stop to it! Stanley, come on!"

"What? No way!" Stanley protested. "This place has free food!"

Stanford stopped. "Wait, are you serious?"

Stanley nodded. "As a heart attack."

Stanford stormed off, muttering about stupid brothers and manipulative demons.

"Doing all right, Hughes?" asked Cypress, after Seuss and Melody had herded most of the kids off to some activity or other.

"I mean, I wasn't expecting this specific scenario," Ash admitted, "but, knowing alternate-dimension-you, this isn't completely out of the left field." She waved a hand. "Besides, you're my employer. I'll put up with way more crap from an employer than I would from a casual acquaintance."

"Stanley actually is my business partner, by the way," Cypress threw out. "We're just riling up his brother for kicks."

Ash considered that. "I could believe it," she allowed. "Would probably be more skeptical if it was Cipher, but," she paused, "you seem like a decent enough guy, Cypress."

That seemed to interest him. "Oh?"

Ash shrugged. "The Cipher that I knew was reasonable and professional, but he was not particularly kind or conscientious."

Bill snickered. "Spend a trillion years in a decaying dimension, and you'll either go completely insane… or mellow the hell out."

"Because, eventually, you have to choose," Bill continued. "Either everyone matters or no one matters. And if no one matters, then you don't matter either, so that road usually leads to insanity. Not something I'd recommend."

"Huh," said Ash. That, oddly enough, was honestly the most reassuring thing she'd heard in weeks.

She could get used to this place.

Chapter End Notes
"The Wizard's Dilemma" by Diane Duane.

'See something say nothing' quote was from Welcome to Nightvale's Twitter account, I'm pretty sure.

And yeah, I know his name's 'Soos' but I it took me forever to figure out the first time I saw Gravity Falls.

This chapter got split, so now estimated chapter count is 38.
The last few weeks had seemed, well Ash had been reluctant to use the term, but they'd seemed *scripted*. That was, the average day at Camp Cypress seemed to consist of Stanford Pines showing up to fight Cypress/rescue kids/convince Stanley Pines, and then leaving utterly defeated. Very Roadrunner vs Wile E. Coyote, but Ash had gotten the impression, from Sai's utter terror at their first meeting with Cipher, that these particular events were nowhere near canon. Not that she was complaining about that, or anything really, when things could have been so much worse. She was instead doing her level best to remain unobtrusive.

It hadn't escaped her notice, after all, that she was never left alone with any of the kids, and was more often than not shunted off into cleaning duty, dish washing, or various other types of grunt work. And that was when Ash asked for something to do. If she didn't ask for work, then they left her to her own devices. Probably had something to do with the fact that she looked eight, but still, being eight meant hyperactivity, and if Ash wasn't currently capable of reading for six hours at a stretch, well she was certainly capable of working for three or four, and she was definitely still paranoid enough to worry that they'd kick her out if she wasn't useful.

Which, honestly, even Ash acknowledged was somewhat ridiculous. If they decided that they didn't like her, then all the excuses in the world wouldn't keep her there, but Ash still kept a timesheet that she'd made herself in Microsoft Word, just to make herself feel slightly better about the whole situation. She was putting in her eight hours a day; no one could say that she wasn't.

As for anything long term, Ash was biding her time. She'd almost forgotten how much free time kids had, even accounting for the work she was doing. She no longer had to dump every free moment into studying or working to earn money for textbooks.

In the interests of reliving her childhood, she'd picked a few YA novels to re-read out of the camp library, but her tastes had apparently gotten less violent and more subtle since the last time she was eight. Possibly this said something about the differences in brain structure between adults and children, or possibly she'd just been weird as a kid. She'd never seen the relevance of the Itchy and Scratchy satire on The Simpsons as a child, but now… yeah, she got more or less where they were coming from.

In terms of writing, well, all of her muscle memory was gone. She couldn't type half as fast as she used to be able to. She had all her social instincts, including anxiety, but she didn't have any of her body language habits.

Still, at least she didn't have to worry about acting her age, or about going to school again. That was something.

Although now she no longer had 'fear of disappointing her family' to use as a motivator, so what exactly was she supposed to use instead?

Well, of course she needed to take care of herself so that Celadon wouldn't be harmed, but what about the bigger picture?

"Ash."

Ash stopped and glanced behind her. She'd been bringing up the tail end of the nature trail hike, so stopping wouldn't leave her in anyone's way. That voice, she hadn't heard it since…
"Garnet," said Ash, with a smile. "Nice to see you again."

Most of the kids had stopped to see what was happening. Pines and Cypress were making their way over, to place themselves between the kids and the possible source of danger.

"How goes it?" Ash continued, ignoring the stares they were receiving.

"Fairly well," answered the Crystal Gem, doing the same. "As I'm sure you're aware, after we reach the 'end' of our stories, we're sent back to the 'beginning.' And, if we're aware that they're stories, then we retain all our memories. And if you're human, it's only your memories."

She handed Ash a tablet. Had she been holding that the whole time? Ash couldn't say with any degree of certainty. Her observational skills were so bad that it had taken her weeks to even notice that Stanford Pines had polydactyly. No telling what else she might have missed.

Hang on, she'd handed Ash a tablet.

*Her* tablet.

Ash turned it on, and found that the internal storage was now in the range of terrabytes, and that at least one of them was taken up by ebooks,

Ash looked up.

Garnet grinned. "We thought you might enjoy some new reading material."

That startled a laugh out of her. "Well," said Ash, "you're not wrong. Thank you, all of you."

"You're welcome," said Garnet. "Need anything else while I'm here?"

"I," Ash glanced down at the tablet. "I think I'm alright, actually. If you see Sai or Celadon, tell them I said 'hi.' Also, you may need to worry about dimension-swapping. The last person to occupy this body was probably the version of Sai whose Karma Sai got stuck with. Which could be weak evidence for Sai currently being in the dimension of whoever's Karma *I'm* currently saddled with. And God only knows where Celadon ended up."

Garnet nodded. "That would explain quite a few things on our end, actually. Thanks. You're the first of your cohort that we've found..." wait, Sai hadn't been sent back to her old dimension? "...but hopefully this means we're on the right track to finding the others again," said Garnet. "We'll keep you posted."

Ash tucked the tablet under her arm. "Sounds good."

Garnet paused, glancing at their audience. "It's good to see you putting yourself out there, Ash. We heard about what happened on the Nostromo and, well, it's nice to see that we've been worrying over nothing."

Ash hastened to reassure her. "Oh, no I'm totally fi—" she paused.

"Celadon told you about the Nostromo?" Ash asked, her smiled becoming fixed.

"Celadon told the entirety of Deep Space Six about the Nostromo," Garnet informed her.

"...well," said Ash, brightly, after a moment, "I guess I can cross the trek-verse off the list of universes where I can ever show my face again!"
"Really?" asked Garnet.

Ash deflated. "No, but a girl can dream." She sighed. "Thanks, for the heads up. There's no way any of them forgot, but this at least gives me more time to workshop on the PR side of things."

"Not really necessary, but whatever works for you." Garnet waved. "See you around, Ash."

Ash waved back. "See you, Garnet!"

The Crystal Gem vanished.

Ash gripped the tablet, warmth flooding through her chest as she did so. They cared about her, enough to check up on her, enough to track down Sai and Celadon. That meant a lot more to Ash than she could bring herself to articulate, at the moment.

Okay then. If nothing else, she needed to keep her shit together in case company came over to visit from other realities. She could work with that.

She turned to face Pines and Cypress. "Sorry about that," she began. "Terribly unprofessional of me to take social calls at work. I'll do my utmost not to let it happen ag—"

Ash cut herself off as she heard a thud.

She turned, and saw that Stanford Pines had fallen out of a tree.

"What in the name of Hugh Everett was that?!" he exclaimed.

"Garnet," answered Ash. "Leader of the Crystal Gems."

"It looked like an alien!"

"Here," said Ash, handing him the tablet. "Search for 'Steven Universe.' And, if you value your sanity, do not search for 'Gravity Falls.'"

Ford tapped on the tablet, and Ash stepped back onto the trail, making her way through the crowd, to lead the pack instead of following.

Two days later, Stanford Pines stumbled back into camp. The kids had already gone to bed. It was just Pines, Cypress, Melody, Soos, and Ash having an impromptu meeting in the canteen.

"Stanley," said Ford. "Did you break my science fair project, back in high school?"

"Well, yeah," said Lee. "Had to summon Bill to fix the damned thing."

Stanford frowned. "...but you were barely lucid the entire month before graduation! Honestly, we thought you'd started using drugs."

"Might've been his body," said Cypress, "but it wasn't Stanley who was acting strange, Sixer. And then you went off to college and left your brother all alone, with only me for company. Brotherly loyalty, I tell ya. There ain't nothing like it!"

"Shut up, Bill," said Stanley, looking annoyed. "I can be selfless, if I feel like it."

Ford, on the other hand, was appalled. "You're in debt to a demon, because I decided to go to college?!!"

"…oh," said Ash, in belated realization, "I guess you did watch Gravity Falls, after all."

"And you!" said Stanford Pines, whirling around to face her.

Ash tensed. Why was he mad at her?

"Here," said Stanford, handing back the tablet. "I've copied the data, already."

Oh. Apparently he wasn't.

"Thanks," said Ash, before handing off the tablet to Stanley Pines, who barely glanced at it before handing it off to Cypress.

"Stanley, he's dangerous," protested Stanford. "If he ever manages to obtain physical form in our reality, the consequences will be disastrous!"

Bill laughed. "Stanford, my buddy, my pal… what makes you think that my current form isn't physical?"

"But, that's impossible!" Ford sputtered. "You couldn't have broken out by yourself!" Something seemed to occur to him. "Stanley…?"

Stanley shrugged. "For that matter, what makes you think the debt between us is me owing Bill?"

"Welp," said Melody. "That's about my limit for drama. Mr. Pines, Mr. Cypress, we're just gonna head off to bed, now. Good night!"

Soos and Ash quickly nodded and followed in her wake.

The three of them walked through the darkness, towards the counselors' cabin.

"So, dude," began Soos, "Like what even is 'Gravity Falls'? You told Stanford Pines not to search for it, but isn't it just the name of the town?"

"In another universe, it's also a cartoon," said Ash. "I never saw it myself, but my old roommate was a fan. All I know is that it made her terrified of Bill Cipher, an alternate universe counterpart of your own Bill Cypress."

"Your… 'evil twin' said things along the same lines," said Melody.

Ash snickered. "Less 'evil twin' more 'evil version of my fictional counterpart,' but I get the gist. She tell you that she was fictional as well?"

Melody blinked. "No. You're fictional?"

"I'm an extra in a webcomic called 'Four Stories Short,'" Ash confirmed. "I die in chapter one. Garnet's from a cartoon called 'Steven Universe.' My fictional counterpart, Sai, was from a piece of Steven Universe fanfiction: a villain who died tragically. After our deaths, we were sent back to the start of our stories, but through a series of unfortunate events, we had swapped bodies. I lived a life as Cultivar Muscovite; she lived a life as Clara Hart. But neither of us lived in this particular universe, I'm fairly certain.

"Throughout our lives, and subsequent afterlife," Ash continued, "we were told things about
ourselves that made no sense. This led us to the conclusion that there were other versions of
ourselves out there that people were confusing us with. Another Ash Hughes, another Saino Moore.
I'm guessing they were body-swapped like me and Sai, so if you saw 'me' in your universe's last go-
around, I'd assume it was alternate-Sai, or as I call her, 'Evil Sai.'"

Soos blinked. "Dude, I got less than half of that."

Ash shrugged. "It's… not really important. I am curious though, if you thought that I was her, why
did Cipher—Cypress—try to hire me as a counselor?"

Melody and Soos exchanged a glance. "Well," said Melody, "Honestly, she was a lot of fun to have
around. So determined to be taken seriously, but so very ill-equipped to deal with any of us."

"Kind of like the little bad guy from the Teenage Robot Show," offered Soos.

"...Killgore?" said Ash, in something like horror.

"Yeah! That's the guy!" said Soos. "We all had a blast foiling her plans for world domination and
stuff. So much so that Mr. Cypress decided to fake being the bad guy this season. Who knows?
Might even be the start of a new tradition."

"I was hired… to be a joke of a supervillain?" asked Ash, not truly able to believe it.

Melody giggled. "Yeah. We've all been getting a lot of whiplash, trying to reconcile your current
personality with the Muscovite that we remember."

"Huh," said Ash, as they reached the cabin door. "Well, that's a lot to think over. Thanks for telling
me."

"Hey, no problem, dude!" said Soos.

"Goodnight!" said Melody.

"Night!" returned Ash, as she went to her own room.

Relieved that she finally had some sort of handle on the internal politics and gossip mill of the camp,
Ash had relaxed somewhat, and was currently spending her lunch break reading on her tablet in the
shade.

"Heya, kid," said Stanley Pines. "Whatcha reading?"

"'The Confidence Game' by Maria Konnikova," answered Ash. "It's about the psychology of con
artistry."

Stanley blinked. "You wanna learn how to con people?"

"I am not great with people, in general," Ash admitted, "but I often find myself tasked with
persuading them of various things. Having more tools in my arsenal to do that would be… helpful."

Stanley considered that, rubbing his chin. "Oh, well, as an amateur businessman, myself, I can offer
you a few pointers."

Ash placed the tablet aside. "Really? I'd appreciate that. Thank you."

Stanley nodded. "Well, first off…" he began, taking a seat and propping his elbows on the table to
flip his hands over in a stage magicians 'nothing up my sleeves' gesture, "… you gotta know your marks. Er, I mean 'customers'..."

Ash folded her arms on the table and leaned forward. Books would always be there later, and there would always be more of them, but in-person instruction? She'd take every bit of it that she could get.

Ash lay awake in the middle of the night, several nights later, plagued by feelings of doubt and betrayal. Occam's Razor. The simplest explanation was usually the correct one.

What if Sai had only been pretending to be her friend all this time, and this actually was where Sai had lived during their last lifetime? What if she'd been lying to Ash about everything, and had been following some dark agenda of her own all along?

What if she'd only been using Ash as a pawn or a game piece?

Well, what if?

That wouldn't change the fact that Sai had helped Ash through the most difficult time in her, for lack of a better word, 'life.' All it would change was how Sai had felt about it. After a certain level of commitment, there was no difference between 'pretending to be someone's friend' and 'actually being their friend.'

Also, Ash was lonely and her standards were probably not the highest.

She pulled her tablet over, opened the web browser, dialed down the volume, and went to a radio streaming site to listen to public radio for awhile. Cypress had returned it the day after she'd given it to him, but had made no comment on its contents.

A few songs went by mindlessly, and Ash started to drift back into sleep, until a familiar opening stanza snapped her straight back into wakefulness.

"She went down last October, in a pouring, driving rain…"

Ash remembered this song. Hadn't thought of it in years, but she remembered it, had heard it on a car ride in her first childhood, had even looked up the sheet music at one point to play on the keyboard. "The Mary Ellen Carter" by Stan Rogers, though this was a choral cover rather than the original.

When she'd first heard the song, she'd thought it that had been talking about a person, rather than a ship, for the first half of the song. But, initial confusion aside, it was honestly one of the best folk songs Ash had ever heard. Not that she'd really listened to many, but still.

She lay back and let the lyrics and the nostalgia wash over her.

"And you, to whom adversity has dealt the final blow,

With smiling bastards lying to you everywhere you go

Turn to, and put out all your strength of arm and heart and brain

And, like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again!"

Ash sighed. Serendipity. That was something that she'd missed. For all the things she'd suffered in this incarnation, it was still her home, in the sense that so much here was familiar and comforting.
This timeline was different, of course, as though all the coin flips of chance had been re-tossed and many had fallen differently.

But the music, the movies, and the pop culture? They were similar enough for Ash to enjoy, for which she was immensely grateful.

As the song faded away, Ash put the tablet back to sleep, then closed her eyes to do the same, herself.

Over the last two weeks of camp, they'd watched 'Gravity Falls' in the evenings using a projector and a sheet.

It had been phenomenal, but now Ash was even madder that Sai had always refused to read Flatland.

She had no idea what was going on in this dimension, or how things had gone so differently here, but she was definitely willing to give Cypress the benefit of the doubt, especially if it meant that she didn't have to do anything.

Now it was morning of the final day of camp. That afternoon, parents would be showing up to pick up their kids.

Ash had a few outstanding offers for places to stay, but she had turned them down. Part of her felt like she should go back and see whether reconciliation with her parents was truly impossible. Or, if nothing else, she now had enough money to buy bus tickets. She could try her luck with one of her other relatives. For now she was avoiding thinking about it, in favor of helping with the final cleanup and organization needed around the camp.

For all the busywork she'd wound up doing, Ash was still a little sad that it was over. She'd never had a full-time job before, and it had been a nice change of pace to work one.

Melody and Soos (She was almost positive she'd gotten the spelling right by now) were on friendly terms with her, though most of the kids were still wary.

Stanford Pines had hung around, fascinated by all the weirdness in Gravity Falls.

He'd rarely participated in activities unless the kids at camp came to his RV to drag him out, but he'd seemed to find enough to occupy him without outside influence.

"Ash Hughes," came a voice over the PA System, pulling her from her thoughts. "Paging Ash Hughes. Please report to the Front Office at your earliest convenience."

The voice on the intercom had been female, and somewhat familiar, though Ash couldn't say for sure where she'd heard it before, due to the distortion. She glanced at Pines and Cipher—Cypress, damnit—and headed cautiously towards the Office. The two of them followed.

Ash had an unpleasant flash that it might have been her parents, but when she arrived she instead found a woman that she didn't recognize in the slightest. Nor apparently, did either of the others.

"Ash Hughes?" said the woman, holding out a hand. "Dylan Quincy. Nice to meet you."

"Delinquency'?" said Ash, certain that she couldn't have heard correctly.

The woman smiled so faintly that it was barely there, before reiterating. "Last name, Quincy. First name, Dylan. 'Dylan Quincy.'"
"Nice to meet you," said Ash, as she finally clasped the other's hand and shook it, weakly, her grip going slack almost immediately as she took in a breath.

"Athena?" she said, in disbelief.

"In the flesh," Athena confirmed.

Ash regarded her, skeptically.

"…or at least the artificially-generated image," she conceded, breaking the handshake to pluck a piece of lint from her sleeve. "How have you been, caretaker?"

Ash grimaced. "I've been better, honestly. But these past few months haven't been bad. And yourself?"

"Diaspore and the rest of the hive are well," said Athena. "The T'Kumbra has been on a mission to the Gamma Quadrant for the previous few months. The Manhattan now serves as the flagship of the fleet. The Medusans make new breakthroughs daily. Business as usual, for the most part… save for Celadon."

Ash tensed. "Is she alright?"

"We cannot find her," said Athena. "Therefore, we do not know. I came to request your aid in this matter. The Crystal Gems are tracking down Sai as we speak. Would you be willing to accompany me back?"

Ash nodded. "Of course," she said. "After I finish up this job, I won't have any pressing commitments. In fact…" she turned. "Hey, Cypress, Pines, do you care if I cut out early?"

"Go for it, Hughes," said Pines, affably enough.

"Who's your friend?" said Cypress, seeming slightly more cautious on the matter.

"Oh, this is Athena—" Ash began.

"—Her daughter," Athena interjected.

"…my daughter," Ash confirmed, "whom I am finding it increasingly difficult not to strangle with her own shoelaces."

At the odd looks she was receiving, Ash became annoyed. "What? I told you I was forty. That's plenty old enough to have kids."

"You said that you had two lifetimes where you died at twenty," Cypress pointed out. "That's not entirely the same thing."

He stepped forward, holding out a hand. "Bill Cypress," he said.

Then he morphed into his triangle form. "Or Bill Cipher, if you prefer."

The disguised Romulan held up a hand in salute. "Athena," she said. Then her form flickered, dropping her human appearance. "Live Long and Prosper," she continued, as Stanley Pines let out a shriek of disgust and terror. "I thank you for employing my caretaker. She can be… somewhat difficult."

Ash dragged a hand down her face and shoved at Athena's side. "Aaaand, didn't you say that you
needed my help?" Ash said, trying to ignore Pines' increasingly-panicked swearing, "Let's not stand around yakking all day!"

Athena nodded. "As you wish. Athena to Manhattan. Two to beam up."

With that, the pixelation of transportation overtook her vision, and Ash left the Earth behind.
Sai came to awareness inside her gem, facing all the forms she'd ever taken in the past.

Or, rather, she *should* have been facing them.

She was only seeing one: the form she'd spawned with in her kindergarten.

This was, Sai thought, a *decidedly* bad sign.

Such a bad sign that Sai decided to form immediately, rather than tweaking her appearance, for the sheer sake of gaining more data faster.

Sure enough, as the world took shape around her, she found herself in her kindergarten on Serpentine IV.

Facing her were the Crystal Gems, or Garnet and Pearl at least. Sai wanted to be relieved, but their hostile body language gave her pause.

"Hello, again," said Garnet.

"Crystal Gems," answered Sai, not really sure what else to say.

"We have overthrown the Diamonds and now rule the Gempire," said Pearl.

"Oh." said Sai.

"You," Pearl continued, frowning in distaste. "If you ever want us to trust you again, you will spend the next millennium serving the Ophions, atoning for the mistakes of your past and learning some measure of self-control."

"Understood?" said Garnet.

Sai's eyes burned with resentment. "Understood."

The Crystal Gems nodded and left, and Sai began to wander over towards where an Ophion technician was speaking with a group of Jade, to see what marching orders the 'sneople' might have for her.

It was odd, Sai thought, that the Crystal Gems would expect someone who couldn't even manage basic altruism to accomplish this complete turnaround of character that they seemed to be anticipating would happen.
It seemed obvious that they only remembered what was 'canon,' and had no recollection of their last life together, nor did they seem to remember meeting Ash, either, so that would be at least two lives they’d forgotten. That would make it likely that there were at least a few lives that Sai might have forgotten, herself, but she had no idea what to do with that theory. At any rate, so far as the Crystal Gems knew, Sai was nothing more than a genocidal supervillain in need of a heel-face turn.

Sai would be able to feign it, of course, but that was because Sai was already a good person. It would probably increase her self-discipline and give her own arrogance a healthy reality-check, but that was because she was approaching this challenge with an open mind and an eye for self-improvement. If she truly had been her canon self, then she doubted that it would have done squat.

But Sai had been handed enough half-finished projects in her time as a cultivar, that this wasn't anything new. It might not have been her fault that everything was a fucking mess, but she was the one who would suffer for it if things didn't get fixed.

And anyway, this was Sai's universe. It was hers, and she would fix it, regardless of what damage had been done to her reputation.

She hadn't killed anyone yet, she wouldn't have to kill anyone, and that alone was enough. It… it was a huge relief, honestly.

And, sure, it would be tedious as hell to start from the ground up, to prove her good intentions, but Sai was confident that…

And then she stopped, her thoughts trailing off into nothing.

Why, precisely, did she have to prove anything?

She'd spent so much of her life hating herself, for planets she'd killed, the people she'd destroyed, knowing that no amount of remorse could ever bring them back.

And then, Ash had told her that consequences were sometimes beyond anyone's control.

Sai's life had been a lonely one of largely-self-imposed exile. She didn't feel that she deserved to be happy, and she was utterly convinced that any humans who knew who she really was would fear her.

But Ash had trusted her completely.

And, granted, Ash was her doppelganger. In many ways, the two of them were the same person. But then again, that didn't necessarily detract from Sai's conclusion. Even Steven Universe had said, "I don't need you to respect me; I respect me." Sai didn't need anyone else to like her, she already liked herself. Even if she'd never met herself before, she'd still like her.

And, while Sai had largely left mainstream literature alone, after being traumatized by 'The Cider House Rules' and 'Wicked,' she had gotten a lot of enjoyment out of Young Adult and Juvenile Literature, if for no other reason than the former having the Cassandra Claire Controversy, and the latter having Harry Potter.

In particular, she'd read 'A Series of Unfortunate Events' on Ash's recommendation. And, while she would, at some point, have to write a fic entitled 'A Series of Unfortunate Implications,' in reference to the series' use of the trope 'Red Right Hand,' she still largely approved of the books, and how they explained turns of phrase such as 'follow suit' and 'red herring' to young readers.
The seventh book remained her favorite, not for the ‘guardian of the week’ or for the setting, but for a single scene where the villain had offered the siblings a choice. Two of them would die, one of them would go with him.

It was a classic way of stirring up drama as a writer, as it led to angsty, agonizing, and heartbreaking conversations of an insoluble dilemma.

And how had Handler handled it?

By having the characters decide to ignore this sadistic choice and instead focus all their efforts on allowing all three of them to escape.

And that had confused Sai, because why would you even include such an obvious plot hook if you weren't going to capitalize on it? It had been awhile before she'd realized that this wasn't part of the 'teach the children literary tropes' plot thread, but rather the 'teach the children life lessons,' theme. Just like many of the other books talked about skimming tables of contents for information, or about idiosyncratic filing systems, the Vile Village taught children that they didn't have to let other people define what choices were open to them.

And that spoke to her. For all that Sai tried to be a good person, she enjoyed nothing so much as flipping over metaphorical tables, revealing a plot twist, or just standing on top of a mecha, screaming, 'who the hell do you think I am?!' at the sky, a la Gurren Lagan.

For all that Sai tried to be good, she still absolutely loved playing the villain.

And really, was it any wonder why?

After all, it was the villain, not the hero, who set the tone of most stories. Heroes, by and large, were the same. They could fit into any story, and were often nothing more than inoffensive blank slates that the audience was meant to project themselves onto.

But the villains?

Well, the villains were actually allowed to be interesting.

James Bond was hyper-competent to the point of Suedom. The best part of any Bond film was always the villain.

Same went for Pokemon, Carmen Sandeigo, or virtually any other Saturday morning cartoon.

And, when it came right down to it, what was it that separated, say, Grimm from Brooklyn 99?

Well, the writing styles were notably different. Though both were police shows, one was a comedy and the other a drama.

But also, one of them had Adalind Schade and the other had Doug Judy.

How far the villains were willing to go was often a reflection of the author's own values and self-censorship.

Sai had used to worry about culturally appropriating tropes from humans, before she'd gotten out of the toxic echo chamber that was most of her social media experience.

Now her thoughts on the subject were more nuanced.

'Freedom is the Right of all Sentient Beings.' Sai was pretty sure that was an Optimus Prime quote,
but she was \textit{definitely} sure that she was getting the hell out of here.

Sai closed her eyes.

Focused for a moment, locating the part of her gem that controlled gravity regulation, and dialed it down a few notches.

She bent her knees, then launched herself out of the canyon, and out of canon, for good.

Sai returned to her old friend, Deep Sea Vents, in the Ophions’ deepest ocean, dispersing her form and leaving her gem to float down to the seabed, lit dimly by the glow of lava.

Ash had told her, once, that she’d learned to diverge her eyes as a child, as well as cross them, because she’d wanted to be able to look at 3D pictures without shoving her face right up next to the page. She could also wiggle her pinky toes and perform the ‘live long and prosper’ hand salute without problem, because those were things she’d practiced.

Sai, in similar manner, had practiced to the point of being able to control things most Gems only did unconsciously. Such as adjust how much gravity affected her physical form.

Or ‘poof’ her form without physical injury.

For several moments, her gem stayed where it was, before it rose up once more and shone, briefly, soon falling back down to the sand, seemingly exactly the same as it had been before.

And it was, except that if one zoomed down far enough, they’d see a tiny little Sai, whose height measured in micrometers, standing on her gem, which stretched out around her like a vast plateau.

Sai was back at her own creation, it seemed. It would be centuries yet before White Diamond threw her in the Tumbler. (And Millennia yet before she got her metaphysical rough edges rounded off on Tumblr).

This was still several planets before she’d gotten frustrated with the fact that she always had to sabotage, that she never got to study anything unless it was to destroy it.

This time was long before she’d ever heard stories of the rebellion staged on her latest assignment, and decided that she had no intention of fighting whatever monsters and traps had been left by the Crystal Gems. Rose Quartz had been rumored to have powers over organic life unmatched in gem history. Sai had known that she’d never have stood a chance.

And so, she’d faked her own death and gone to the oceans to hide out and study the life of this new planet.

And now she was, back at the beginning, with a second chance at life.

The question was, what should she do with it?

Before, Sai had spent a few decades studying sponges and coral, shrinking herself down to the point that she could enter individual cells and study them, before taking the fragments of her gem, and using them to approximate a multicellular organism, with fragments of her gem in the nuclei of her cells.

It was what had made her so hard to kill. Each of her cells had retained gem durability and would retreat into their nuclei when damaged.
Eventually, she'd even deliberately fragmented herself still further to give herself more cells.

Her old body had given her more versatility, but was it right or necessary to damage herself in such a manner a second time?

Well, Terezi Pyrope had worn a blindfold, and she'd never heard anyone criticize her for it.

Perhaps Sai could peel apart her layers without breaking herself?

Maybe she could optimize her memories into fewer sheets of her gem, then grind up a layer or two to give her some fragments, then put herself back together like so much gem plywood?

If she could pull it off, it would give her a body that, like her old one, was nigh-on indestructible.

This time around she could trying being a tank. She'd take damage in order to shield other people.

Sai set to work.

It had been more than a century since 'Muscovite' had disappeared. Garnet, Pearl, Pink Diamond, Steven Universe, and Amethyst were visiting Serpentine IV to sign a peace treaty with the Ophions, when Muscovite rose above the waves to greet them where they stood on the beach.

She wore a mask over the top half of her face. It had two insectoid lenses that looked close enough to spider-man's costume to cause copyright issues, had they been on Earth a few millennia hence. She wore a crop top, which she'd thought might make Ash more comfortable with body-swapping, if they ever found each other again… but which also had two round target designs over the chest, their bulls-eyes directly above where a human would have nipples, which she was pretty sure would do the exact opposite, but Sai hadn't been able to resist. She would never stop being mad about the tumblr titty ban, even if it wouldn't happen for millennia yet.

"Greetings," she said. "My name is Saino Moore. This is a nice planet you've got here, but I'm afraid I've outstayed my welcome. I'll be heading to Earth now."

With that, Sai threw herself through the door to their spaceship and locked it, taking off and setting course for earth.

Honestly, Sai knew that she was being too harsh on the Crystal Gems. They didn't remember any of her character development, so their reactions were understandable.

But, at the same time, Sai wasn't about to spend her life making excuses for other people. If you assumed people's personalities and motivations without even trying to talk to them, well, it was only a matter of time before you were proven wrong.

There had been a time when she'd wanted nothing more than to earn the trust and respect of the Crystal Gems, but… now it almost felt as though that door had closed. If they gave her their respect, she'd take it, but it was no longer something it would cause her pain or discomfort not to have.

A beeping informed her that the ship was reaching its destination, and Sai pivoted around to attend to the control panel, her cloak swirling as she did so.

Her cape was no longer floor length, stopping around mid-thigh, so hopefully she'd spend less time tripping over it in this lifetime. It was also attached to her arms this time, strengthening the reference to White Diamond. Her cape retained its glitter and camouflage motif, though now it had gem
writing woven into its structure. Seeing as the cape was rarely flared out flat, it was difficult to read, but her cape had been decorated with the words to a Jonathan Coulton song: "A Talk with George." Sai wasn't really sure which George he'd meant, but it had probably been a historical figure of some sort, in the same vein as Don McLean's song 'Vincent.'

The outside of the cape showed the song's penultimate verse:

"So, enjoy yourself and do the things that matter,

'Cause there isn't time and space to do it all.

Love the things you try: drink a cocktail, wear a tie,

Show a little grace if you should fall."

And the inside of her cape showed the final verse:

"Don't live another day, unless you make it count.

There's someone else that you're supposed to be.

There's something deep inside of you that still wants out,

And shame on you if you don't set it free."

Sai opened the door and stepped out onto the Earth.

Three millennia later and Sai sat upon her throne, in her Antarctic fortress of solitude (DC could sue her frozen, imperial ass). A minion had just brought her a report on the Crystal Gems, and their latest efforts to thwart her plans.

Sai had spent most of her time on earth villain-baiting.

That is, she'd spent all of her time helping people, but her demeanor while doing so had been so Obviously Evil™ that even now, several thousand years later, everyone, human and gem alike, were all still convinced this was part of some master plan.

Sai rose and was gazing dramatically out the window, when an intruder had dropped into sight on the balcony.

The intruder had in his hands a tablet. It looked like the same tablet she, Ash, and Celadon had given some Naruto guys that one time, so that checked out.

"Here," he said, handing it to her. "This took quite awhile to find."

"Thank you," said the Gem. "What is it?"

"Your own 'canon' storyline," replied the elemental. "It was missing from the data you gave us."

"Wait," said the gem, "you mean my fanfic from Ash's universe? How is this possible?"
"We have very good tracker squads," was his only answer.

Sai turned on the tablet, searched through it, and her eyes began to water as she scanned the first chapter, noting the differences. "I know I already said it but, thank you."

"And we thank you for your gift of reconnaissance," he replied. "As for the fanfiction, think nothing of it. We namesakes have to stick together, after all."

Sai laughed. "Well, I'm your namesake, at least" she clarified, "but sure."

That seemed to intrigue him. "You named yourself after me?" he asked.

"Well, you and Paint Tool Sai," she admitted. "It's just, I saw a lot of myself in you, even if I never actually saw your canon series. You were indoctrinated at a very young age, but you managed to regain your independence. And you're an artist to boot. I don't know how much of that relates to you, but… it inspired me, so just thanks, for being yourself."

"You're welcome." The elemental folded his arms behind his back, standing at rest, adding, "This concludes the mandatory portion of my mission. The second part is optional."

"And what would that be?" asked the gem.

"Should it be your wish," said the elemental, "I have been instructed to reunite you with the human, 'Ash Hughes,' and the Fusion, 'Celadon.'"

"Sure," said Sai, glancing behind her. Her minions would love the chance to run the place for a few months, so things should be all right here for the time being. "That sounds…" the gem tried to keep her voice from breaking, "that sounds great."
Celadon formed in the darkness, and discovered that she lacked senses of any conventional sort.

The Vulcans had thought that—since subsections of reality were clearly narrative in structure—that playing out those narratives might grant them greater control over their world and their timeline. They’d obviously been onto something—since Celadon had apparently been ejected from their continuity, altogether—but was that a good thing? At this point, it was impossible to tell.

It was then that Celadon became aware that the darkness in which she had found herself was not as empty as she’d previously assumed.

"What the hell?" someone said. "Who are you? Get the fuck outta my head!"

Celadon felt a wave of disgust and anger wash over her, and that gave her pause. The emotion wasn’t hers.

Celadon reoriented herself, and realized that, yes, this did feel like a mindscape, albeit one completely dark and without metaphorical landmarks or other features.

"...I do not believe that I can," she told the other mind.

"Fuck no, not another Sue! I cannot fucking deal with another of you vapid, moe fangirls today! Get the hell out or get exorcised, bitch!"

As it turned out, the threat had not been an idle one, and, before the day was out, Celadon got to experience what the wrong end of an exorcism felt like, first hand. It had not been pleasant, to say the least.

Celadon formed in the darkness and frantically swept her awareness through this new mind. She felt the muted echoes of what were probably dreams, but could sense nothing else.

This new host was most likely asleep. If she was lucky, Celadon might have a few hours to think before the next confrontation.

The last mind—‘Kiriko,’ she’d thought their name had been—had called Celadon a 'Sue.' And, well, they weren’t entirely wrong.

After all, an entity that entered the mind of another after premature death? That was clearly a case of possession.

And a 'Possession Sue' was just as much a Sue as any 'Ebony' or 'Mary' out there.

Celadon couldn't even say that such an attribution was outside of her nature. After all, Sai and Ash
had body-swapped with each other like it was going out of style, even if it had been more of a 'fuck you' against a common enemy than the morally-skeevy position in which Celadon now found herself.

It was really starting to hit Celadon that she was a character. For all that Ash had raged against the metaphorical heavens about her backstory, the full horror of it hadn't really sunk into Celadon's psyche. Sai's flippancy regarding anything not considered 'her fault' had softened the blow, somewhat.

Now, however, Celadon found herself channeling more of Ash's half of her personality.

This was like the plot of a bad fanfic.

Okay, that might have been a bit harsh. Many Possession Sue stories were technically excellent works, but Celadon had always found them vastly more unnerving than, say, 'Reincarnation Sues.' It was one thing to carve out a place for your self-insert in canon. It was another thing, altogether, to erase a canon character and then take their place. It bothered Celadon on a deep and visceral level. It squicked her the hell out. Like Ash trying to eat in public, or Sai reminiscing about her past, this situation made it feel almost painful to even exist.

And now, it was looking very much as though that pain would be her life now.

The 'why's, in many ways, were unimportant. This situation was a common story premise, so—in their narrative-rich multiverse—that could be enough reason, all by itself. It could also be the fact that Celadon had no place in 'canon,' or maybe it was some sort of karmic clusterfuck that may or may not have even been justified.

In the end, the reasoning made very little difference.

The other mind was stirring, and Celadon gathered her composure for another argument.

Upon sensing the intruder, however, the other mind wordlessly moved to smother Celadon, instinctively trying to remove the threat.

The other mind crushed her.

Celadon disappeared.

After another few painfully short incarnations, Celadon once again found herself within a mind asleep, and this gave her opportunity to sort further through her thoughts.

Celadon considered trying to destroy herself, but couldn't truly bring herself to commit to it.

It didn't seem right, to look at the short term. She should try to save everyone, even herself.

It was like picking apart the trolley problem. Such a scenario would never be more than an exercise in agony. Obviously, there was no sustainable society that would require consistent trolley problem dilemmas. The whole thing was only as common a thought experiment as it was, Celadon thought, because it played the human social instinct about not harming other people against the cerebral drive to preserve the greatest number of lives possible. Certainly, no similar philosophical dilemma existed amongst Gems. If a soldier could better serve the empire as shards in a cluster experiment than as a functioning gem, then she would be shattered without hesitation. If a soldier need be sacrificed to further the mission, then the loss was not necessarily unacceptable.
The ridiculousness of the scenario became even more obvious when one considered the 'organ transplant' variation, illustrated so starkly in that YA 'Unwind' series of Shusterman's. Of course you shouldn't try to decide whether to kill one person to save five; you should work on ways to save all five. In the short run, you might not save those particular five, but you'd save uncounted lives in the future because of your efforts.

The other mind finally awoke and immediately panicked as she noticed Celadon's presence.

It took a few days, but the other mind and her allies managed to 'seal her,' whatever that meant.

Celadon vanished.

---

Celadon, it seemed, was a Possession Sue.

She couldn't die.

Literally, she could not be killed by the actions of others, only banished.

Morally, she could not attempt to take her own life.

She was stuck.

…but, if this particular flavor of existential hell was familiar to her because of her components, then so too was the strength they'd developed from dealing with it.

Ash might have been guarded and reticent, when it came to any form of trust, but she'd faced the sensory hell of college, for years, until she'd been literally unable to continue due to her narrative-mandated death.

Sai might have been more repressed than a vacuum-sealed storage bag, but she was always absolutely prepared to throw dignity out the window, should her own convictions require it.

And now, thanks to the two of them, Celadon understood something else innately, as well:

To be a Sue was pathetic, there was no doubt about that.

…but to be a Sue who destroyed herself because she couldn't hack the ramifications of her own existence?

That would have been worse.

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…but to be a Sue who destroyed herself because she couldn't hack the ramifications of her own existence?

That would have been worse.

Far worse.

Celadon persisted.

She wasn't even sure how many iterations it was later that Celadon awoke in a new mind, which she greeted with a morose and unenthusiastic, "Hello," only to feel a warm and welcoming tide of emotion wash over her in response.

"Hello!" said the other mind. "My name's Tohru Honda! What's yours?"

"…Celadon," said Celadon, in disbelief.

It stood to reason, of course, that not everyone in the universe could be an asshole…
...but, seeing as the most conversation she'd had since this whole debacle began had consisted of screaming matches with her various 'hosts,' Celadon had not developed an optimistic outlook when it came to other people's characters.

After a few more introductory remarks, Tohru turned her attention elsewhere, and Celadon sank back into the darkness, unchallenged.

Fruits Basket, huh? If it had been anyone else, then Celadon might have doubted their benevolence, but someone like Tohru Honda...

Celadon had never seen the series firsthand, but she remembered both Sai's apathy towards the anime and Ash's fangirling over it.

It had been one of the first anime that Ash had ever seen, after all. It'd reminded the human of the Twilight Saga, in that it had been a fluffy, romantic wish-fulfillment series with comedic undertones. Later, after having watched some of the heavier anime, Ash been reluctant to re-watch Fruits Basket, because she'd by then become well-aware that she'd had substantially lower standards back when she'd first started on the genre, and she'd been worried that she wouldn't enjoy it as much the second time.

Upon further reflection, that worry had been unfounded.

While canon Tohru Honda had been optimistic to the point of absurdity, the advice that she'd given had always been genuine, especially to Ritsu Sohma. 'Even if you can't see a reason to live now, keep living to find one.' Celadon was pretty sure that had been the gist of it, and it had been a much more nuanced and realistic take than she'd anticipated from a Shojo romance.

Then there was the finale, with its deconstruction of the 'for your own good' manipulation trope, but also the 'love conquers all' ending.

Tohru had been terrified, but she'd cared enough to track cat-boy down and be honest about that terror. And, in a way, that had been more meaningful than any declaration of blind acceptance could ever be.

...of course, there was no guarantee that this world was even similar to canon, but still...

Celadon remained there, with her own thoughts, until Tohru asked her opinion on something.

"I'm sorry," said Celadon, coming back to herself. "What did you say?"

"Which dress looks better," Tohru began, "gold or green?"

"I cannot see either of them," Celadon admitted, "but I would go with—"

"Wait, you can't see!?" said Tohru, sounding horrified.

"...well, I can make an effort, if you'd like?" offered Celadon, "But I'd thought you would wish to keep your senses to yourself?"

"... you think I would shut you in a box?" Tohru sounded as though she might start crying. "Like the Sohma family wanted to do to Kyo?"

Celadon backpedaled. "No," she said, "No, of course not. It's just. I'm a guest. I don't want to make you uncomfortable. I'm a fusion, and you are something like a component to me. If you don't want me, then I should not exist."
Celadon paused. "Not that I think you don't want me," She clarified, upon feeling an aura of hurt emanating from her host. "I just want to make sure to consider your feelings."

"Of course, I want you to exist!" Tohru exclaimed. "You're a good person! I mean, I've had my fair share of people in my head, but you're by far the nicest!"

Something clicked into place within Celadon's mind, and she suddenly understood something that had previously baffled her.

"...you've been targeted by possession sues before?" Celadon asked. She didn't really need the confirmation. It would perfectly explain Celadon's harsh reception in all her previous Possession Sue iterations. And how they had all been so prepared to deal with her.

"Possesion Sue...?" said Tohru, obviously confused at the term. "I've had other people take over my mind, yeah. It's scary."

And just like that, Celadon realized what her objective had to be for the foreseeable future.

"You've been incredibly generous and hospitable, yourself, Honda-san," she said, praying that she wasn't butchering the honorific. "And I've been feeling bad that I can't really 'pay rent' such as it were. Would you like some lessons in fighting off mental attacks?"

Tohru felt baffled for a moment, before she suddenly understood.

"Oh," said Tohru, "you mean, like martial arts?"

"Something like that," Celadon agreed.

"Sure!" said Tohru. "I mean, if you don't mind..."

"I have nothing but time on my hands," Celadon assured her.

Over the next few months, Tohru Honda slowly gained skill in defending her mind from possession from an outside force.

And, conversely, Celadon slowly gained knowledge on the ins and out of forcefully possessing a body not her own, due to the fact that she was the only sparring partner available for Honda to work with.

It had been depressing how instinctive and easy it had been for the Fusion, but, on the bright side, Celadon had gotten much better at both accessing Tohru's senses, and also on blocking them out, when one of them wanted privacy.

Meanwhile, Tohru's mindscape had been developed into a replica of the house that she shared with Yuki, Kyo, and Shigure Sohma.

A house that now had 'security camera' mental constructs to warn her of intruders, as well, as 'security dog' constructs that would attack any interlopers, which Tohru had trained herself. In addition, there was a jail cell by the vegetable garden for holding onto unruly trespassers, and an exit door, for kicking people out of her mind altogether. They hadn't tested the last one, because Tohru had been adamant that Celadon's safety not be risked. Which kind of went against the whole point of the training in the first place, but whatever. Celadon was so far past caring about being pitied; it wasn't even funny.
Whatever the other 'characters' in that universe might have thought of her, Celadon never found out, as Tohru seemed to be keeping her a secret, so as not to worry the others. The two of them primarily talked while Tohru was at work, or when they occasionally swapped out so that Celadon could do homework or take exams in Tohru's place. Celadon wasn't so great with Japanese literature or culture, but math and science were still firmly in her wheelhouse, as was rote memorization.

All in all, it had been nice to take a break. Celadon hadn't truly had one since the Nostromo, and even that had primarily involved dealing with her components' trauma.

Now, Celadon had loosened up to the point that she'd regained her sense of dark humor. Though exercising said humor in Tohru's presence had led to unusual results.

Soon things had gotten to the eve of the story's end. According to Tohru, this was when the timeline would reset.

Through Tohru's eyes, Celadon observed Doctor Seahorse and the rest of the Zodiac making plans about what to do if Tohru has a Sue the next time they 'reset.' She hadn't been paying all that much attention, truth be told, but she'd heaved a sigh when she heard one of them refer to Possession Sues as 'parasites.'

"My life as a brain parasite," Celadon mused, "what a tragedy."

"There's nothing wrong with you," Tohru assured her. "And, anyway, my mom once told me that a tragedy is a just a hero who got stuck in the wrong story."

Celadon... wasn't sure that she agreed with the statement, but she appreciated the sentiment, nonetheless.

"Thanks, Honda-san."

"Not at all, Ms. Celadon."

Reality reset.

When she next came to awareness, Tohru Honda discovered that she was underwater.

She gasped, and discovered that she could still breathe.

Her arms were gray, which would imply that she wasn't human.

Gills fluttered at the sides of her neck. She had fins in place of ears.

"Oh God," said Celadon, and Tohru breathed a sigh of relief. At least it was Celadon and not a complete stranger.

"This is Alternia," hissed Celadon. "From Homestuck."

"Oh," said Tohru. "A crossover? It's been awhile since we've had a crossover."

"Honda-san," said Celadon, urgently, "you are most certainly the wrong sort of hero for an Alternian story," she began, but cut herself off as something caught her attention.

"So," said a voice, and Tohru looked up. "You're the little guppy looking for a challenge."
Before her stood a fish woman wearing a black and pink wetsuit. She had more hair than anyone Tohru had ever seen. Two orange horns jutted up through waving black strands. On her forehead was a golden tiara with a Pisces symbol embossed on its surface. Her skin was dark charcoal, and her eyes were hidden behind a pair of goggles. She clapped a trident loosely against her side.

"Shit!" said Celadon.

Tohru would have frowned at the language, if Celadon hadn't sounded so terrified.

Pain blossomed across her chest and the water clouded with a pinkish purple color that must have been her blood.

"Oh no," said Celadon. "Oh no, oh no, oh no... You're an Heiress, Honda-san. That's Her Imperious Condescension. This is the Challenge. A fight to the death. Neither of us knows hand-to-hand at nearly high enough a level to take her. We're going to die."

"W-wait," said Tohru, to the woman attacking her. "We don't have to hurt each other!" she tried. "We could be friends, instead."

"Nice try, chum-princess," said the Empress. "I know you feel the instincts as much as I do. This planet ain't big enough for two fushcias."

And the malice in her voice was so palpable that Tohru shrank back, closing her eyes, in spite of herself.

...only to have her eyes snap back open as Celadon took over.

Finding herself within her mindscape, Tohru went inside to the TV and turned it on, looking out through her senses to see what Celadon was seeing, listening to the Fusion's stream of consciousness.

It had been pure martyr instinct when Celadon had taken over Honda's body. It couldn't have been any sort of strategical maneuver, because, as had been mentioned earlier, Celadon had little-to-no combat prowess of any sort.

And in a human body, or a Troll body at this point, she didn't even have her viruses to fight with.

Celadon's mind worked faster than an organic's, even using an organic brain. She could dodge much better than Tohru would have been able to, but that was a stalling tactic at best.

Tohru was in her mind, and safe still, but it felt like there was something else, as well.

Like there was another mind, waiting just out of reach.

Both Ash and Sai had read Homestuck, and had discussed their potential classpects at length. Sai had thought that she was probably a Mage of Blood. Ash had decided that she was most likely an Heir of Hope.

As for Celadon? Judging by the fact that she could feel what she was fairly certain was Tohru's Dreamself, she knew two things, right off the bat: that this couldn't be the end, because if Tohru had been destined to die, she wouldn't have had a Dreamself at all.

And, also, if Celadon was in fact sensing Tohru's Dreamself, then she, herself, was probably a Hero of Mind or a Hero of Heart.
Probably Heart, she decided, since Dream Ghost Dirk had threatened Jake with bodily functions, whereas Terezi had been concerned primarily with decisions.

That, combined with the fact that she looked at the Condense and saw a kindred spirit, well, it meant that Celadon was probably similar to her, class-wise.

Given that Celadon was a Possession Sue, that wasn't entirely unreasonable, as far as theories went.

That would make her a Thief of Heart, then, or possibly a Rogue of Heart. Although, damn it, Nepeta had already been a Rogue of Heart, hadn't she? Oh well, Thief of Heart it probably was, then.

Anyway, the point was, what else had a Thief to do but steal?

Celadon focused, and felt the minds of those around her—the seadwellers come to watch the match, presumably—all of them eclipsed in strength by the mind before her.

Celadon reached her will, her soul, out towards the Condesce, trying to sap her willpower, or at least distract her.

Instead, Celadon felt herself pulled out of Tohru's mind, and into the mind of the Empress.

Celadon had never tried to take possession of a truly unwilling body before. With Tohru, it had been reflex and a reflection of their previous training, more than anything else.

There were no fish puns; there was no pretense of banter or intimidation. Celadon's presence had been enough to spark a true Highblood rage in the Condesce.

There was only reaction, as mental blows rained down upon her.

Celadon grasped for purchase in the mindscape, trying to think of a strategy.

Right, she recalled, wrenching her mind back into focus, it was like she'd been thinking, and she was a Hero of Heart. Probably

And Heart was not just the concept of self.

It also involved the physical self.

The physical brain.

Celadon shifted her awareness, ignoring her cracked and crumbling mind-self, and reached for the first useful nerve cluster she could get her metaphorical hands on, which was one not present in the human brain. It was the set of nerves that controlled the gills.

She shut those down, and the Condesce suddenly found herself incapable of breathing.

Undeterred, the Condense raised a hand to strike Tohru.

Celadon shut down the nerves to that arm.

The Condense finally paused.

"Take another step," Celadon warned, "and I shut down your lungs as well."

The Condense hesitated, then shot towards the surface.
As Her Imperious Condescension summoned her psionics, to try and root Celadon out of hiding in her mind, Celadon contemplated what her next move should be.

She could kill the Condesce, she supposed. She retained enough control for that, certainly.

But she was acting on behalf of Tohru Honda, and she was certain that Honda wouldn't want her to kill anyone.

There were also the rules of canon to consider.

Celadon was an author, which had been represented symbolically by the Cherubs in Homestuck. They ate meat and candy, and they chose between Martyr and Conqueror.

And, in one way or another, that seemed to be the choice presented to all Homestuckian authors. Hussie had chosen Martyr. So had Rose, and Roxy.

Aranea had chosen Conqueror.

So had Caliborn.

Point was, trying to save everyone and be the Big Hero only tended to work if you were the Protagonist, the Designated Leader.

In this case, probably Tohru Honda.

"Water you mean, the heir-fish escaped?" Her Imperious Condescension asked a lackey who had been unfortunate enough to bring her bad news.

"We're working on it, your Condescension—" The underling was forked.

Celadon breathed a metaphorical sigh of relief. She'd played her part, bought what time she'd needed to buy.

And she wasn't going to pull an Aranea; she was going to go out with some measure of dignity.

It was a shame, because now that the possibility had been brought up, Celadon really wanted to know what the Zodiac's hemotypes were. She would've pegged Tohru for a Taurus, not an heiress.

But, then again, Celadon supposed that was just buying into the whole horoscope-equals-personality propaganda that the Empire had spread throughout Troll Culture.

Still, she couldn't help but speculate. Shigure had been a writer, an artist, so Celadon would guess Blue Blood for him. Since Ayame and Hatori and he were all school buddies, that should translate to conscription buddies? They'd probably be blue bloods, too.

If Ayame was Yuki's ancestor, that'd make Yuki indigo as well, which would fit the disdain with which he'd always shown Kyo.

Speaking of the cat, he'd probably be a red-blooded lime mutant, like Karkat Vantas in Homestuck Canon.

And she'd really thought Akito would have been the Heiress. If not that, then Akito was probably a seadweller?

And Hatsuharu was probably a purple-blood, wasn't he? God, Celadon had never been able to stand
the clown cult.

And, honestly, it could have just been similarity to Tavros, but she thought Ritsu would probably have been a Bronze Blood. Same logic would make Kisara an Olive Blood because of the cat/tiger parallel... and Celadon was going to stop there, before her tottering pile of headcanons got any taller.

It became more difficult to think, as the Empress zeroed in on her location and began to erode away her sense of self more quickly.

That saddened her. Celadon still wanted to see the rest of the story, to gauge what difference her actions had made. Not that she expected it to have been much, but still.

She'd wanted to see how things would end.

Celadon's psyche fractured and her mind crumbled to bits, utterly destroyed.

Celadon awakened as a Possession Sue.

Before she could take stock of her situation, she felt another mental attack, and found herself annihilated.

Celadon awakened as a Possession Sue.

She started crying.

It didn't change her fate.

Dozens of iterations later, Celadon awakened as a Possession Sue and found her mental state to be numb.

She started to think about her life, noting that she was nowhere near as broken as she thought she'd be at this point.

Part of it was the relief of having figured out that her 'hosts' weren't reacting to her, specifically, but to the concept of a Possession Sue in the first place.

Which was more than fair, honestly. Celadon felt the same herself.

It was also a little like those old positive reinforcement experiment with rats:

Give them a machine that rewarded them with food for pressing a button, and they'd press the button as long as it gave them food. Change the button so it no longer rewarded them with food, and they would stop pressing it.

But give the rat a broken machine that only rewarded them some of the time?

Well, then they'd keep pressing that button long after it stopped giving them food, just in case the machine started working again. You'd get way more persistence than would ever be reasonable.

And mixing Tohru Honda in with the rest of Celadon's pool of potential hosts? Well, that was one hell of a sporadic reinforcement

Knowing that someone else out there accepted Celadon went a long way. It'd take a lot more than
simple misery to get her to break now.

Celadon endured.

Chapter End Notes

Relevant Tumblr Quotation:

daimonie: "i met a scholar once who said that tragedies aren't about a silly "flaw" or anything, it's about having a hero who's just in the wrong goddamn story."
Celadon did not awaken within a sleeping mind.

Nor did she snap into awareness—in media res, as it were—inside of another conscious mind.

This was because Celadon had instead \textit{materialized}.

On a transporter pad.

Facing down more than a dozen Medusans.

"Success!" cried one of them, and the rest broke into cheers.

Nothing was being demanded of her.

No one was accusing her of anything.

Everything was civil.

And Celadon found herself blinking back tears of sheer, unadulterated \textit{relief}.

While she was still trying to gather her wits and determine whether she recognized any of them, Celadon found herself sandwiched between two much taller people in an embrace.

Celadon glanced up to her left and saw Sai.

Ash was on her right.

And then, as recognition took hold, their bodies collapsed together and Celadon stood by herself.

But no longer alone.

She closed her eyes, and Celadon turned her awareness to her own mindscape, which resembled a featureless white plane, as it always had.

Her components stood before her, both of them grinning like loons.

"Hello," said Sai.

"Hi, Celadon!" said Ash.

"Hey, guys," said Celadon. "What happened?"

Sai's face fell, and Ash's expression became troubled.

"You don't remember?" Ash asked.

Celadon shook her head. "I lost my connection with you two after the gods 'outsourced' you."
"Ah," said Sai. "Well, I got sent back in time, but the Crystal Gems didn't remember me, or like me very much. I killed time for maybe three millennia? Then the Naruto guys found me and brought me here."

Ash looked to Sai, incredulously. "For me it was closer to three months," said Ash. "But, yeah, I got sent to my alternate-self's timeline, then had to deal with the fallout of alternate-Sai scaring the crap out of everyone. Which I did by ignoring nearly all of them."

Celadon sighed. "I'm apparently a Possession Sue. Without you two, I have no anchor. After the Trek timeline reset, I got bounced from host to host until they pulled me back."

Ash and Sai blinked in surprise.

Celadon's expression took on an edge. "... so if you get any bright ideas about sacrificing yourself again for my sake... know that you won't actually be saving me from anything."

Her components blanched.

"We're sorry," said Sai.

"So sorry," added Ash.

Celadon scoffed. "I might be more sympathetic..." she began, "...if I thought that either of you would have been sorry at all, had you two been the only ones to suffer."

"We don't do it again," said Ash.

"I believe you," said Celadon. Then, she began to move back towards her components.

When she reached them, she drew them, once more, into a hug.

And they were still in the mindscape. It shouldn't have done anything.

But, somehow, there was a flash of light, and Celadon found herself in the dark.

"What?" said Sai. "...what just happened?"

"No idea," said Ash's voice. "Wait, is Celadon still here?"

"Yeah," said Celadon. "Hang on, this should still be my mindscape."

She focused on clarifying things. She had developed her own mindscape while trying to speak with her components, back during the first Undertale Debacle. It felt as thought her mindscape had been unmade, and now she had to re-build it.

Well, that was simple enough.

Celadon formed a floor and illuminated their surroundings. After some thought, she added the number '2' in mosaic tiles on the floor.


"Am I the only one feeling ridiculously grateful about that?" asked Sai.

"'Bring me a horse and I am yours forever,'" Ash agreed, and then sighed.
"Honestly," Ash continued, "at this point they could ask me to host, and I don't think I'd tell them, 'no.' I don't like what this implies about my morality, or the flexibility thereof."

"I mean, isn't this just the same snap-decision bias you've always had?" said Sai. "Only now it's positive instead of negative?"

Ash shook her head. "I should be better than this."

"Should you?" said Celadon. "Should you, really? No one would argue that the body should be moral in its processes. It's not immoral to get tired or hungry before you've met your obligations. Why should the mind be different?"

"So you're predisposed to trust people who treat you well and to distrust people who treat you poorly," Celadon continued, "So what? Your mind's template came from your DNA, and everything else came from environment and experience. Why should the mind be inherently moral?"

"If not the body or the mind," said Sai, "then what?"

"The soul? The will?" said Celadon. "The part of you that drives all the machinery, let's call it."

"…you're saying that the 'machinery' breaking down isn't immoral?" said Sai, starting to catch on. "The blueprints and upgrades and wear and tear aren't immoral, but the pilot, the diving force, that's the center of morality."

Celadon nodded. "And, speaking of metaphysics, can we still leave the mindscape?" she asked.

Sai and Ash exchanged a glance, and tried to unfuse.

It worked. Sort of.

There was the sense of breaking that always accompanied diffusion.

But all that happened was they were all three back in Celadon's original mindscape. There was no '2' on the floor.

Sai swore, Ash hummed, and they tried again.

This time, they were all back on the transporter pad.

"Well," said Celadon, as she looked back to the Medusans. "That was a trip and a half."

"We've already given these to your components..." said one of the Medusans, after a few pleasantries had been exchanged, "...but here."

Celadon accepted the padd. "What is it?" she asked.

"Asylum papers," said Ash, "And Citizenship documentation, apparently."

Celadon blinked. "Citizenship?"

"It's not really a commodity, here," Sai said, with a shrug. "Or, I guess it is, but this place is a post-scarcity economy, so most of the normal rules get thrown out the window."

"So," said Celadon, "What are the three of us supposed to do from now on?"
"Within reason, whatever you'd like," said the Medusan. "Your children have asked us to inform you that their doors are always open. Both the T'Kumbra and Manhattan have extended open offers for hospitality, as has the planet of Betazed."

"I… don't know," said Celadon. "What do you two want?" she asked her components.

"I wanna write," said Ash, "But to do that, I need inspiration, so whatever you two feel like doing is fine."

"I haven't seen the two of you for thousands of years," said Sai. "I want to stay with one or preferably both of you. Beyond that, I don't care."

And so, the two of them turned back to Celadon.

"I… still don't know," Celadon admitted. "I never thought farther than, 'I want my old body back.' Now, I guess, maybe, I'd like to keep it?"

She turned to the Medusan. "Is there any way to keep this body once I reset?"

"Did you lose your body after the last reset?"

Celadon nodded. It wasn't truly important, but it did make her feel better that they hadn't known. "I appeared in the mind of another and remained stuck there until my own death, my 'host's' death, or the timeline rolling over," she explained.

"…we'll look into it," said the Medusan. "If nothing else, we can immediately summon you back here the instant our own timeline turns back. We'll see if a more permanent solution can be devised."

"I appreciate it," said Celadon. "Truly. Is there anything we can help you with?"

The Medusan hesitated.

"More than anything else, I'd like to feel useful, for once," Celadon coaxed, with an encouraging smile.

The Medusan nodded in understanding. "Well, it would be more to our benefit than yours, but your visit to our reality last iteration has generated significant interest in the so-called 'Mary Sue' phenomenon. Rudimentary research has revealed that there are fifty-one such entities native to this branch of reality."

The Medusan paused. "Excluding yourselves, of course, since you three hail from the branch corresponding to our own 'mirror reality,' originally."

They waved a hand before continuing. "At any rate, since we deposed the so-called 'gods' of our own reality, this means that the 'Sues' influence is now going unchecked. Consequentially, all of them have been summoned to the Klingon homeworld, Q'uonoS, for an 'orientation' program, detailing the responsibilities and expectations of those visiting other dimensions and timelines."

Celadon nodded. "That's probably a good idea."

"If you were to willingly join the orientation program, it might counteract some of the destructive influences the others have tried to exert."

"Interesting," said Sai. "And how long is the program slated to last?"

"There are contingency plans in place for up to five years," said the Medusan. "But most of us hope
to get things wrapped up within the year. We had originally summoned all fifty-one, but five have since graduated."

"Huh," said Ash, "So it's not so much like you're trying to get everyone to pass algebra, but more like you're trying to evolve pokemon."

"…what?" said the Medusan.

"We'll do it," Celadon clarified.

Her components radiated agreement, and Celadon suddenly wondered how it was that she knew what they were thinking.

She then realized that the connection between them had been restored when they'd fused.

Nice.

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Chapter End Notes

Chapter got split again, so now estimated chapter count is 39. Next Chapter lampoons the Fanfic University trope started by Camilla Sandman.
Chapter 36

Life had been interesting as of late for Mica Vitrianna.

First, she had died, gone to hell, been rescued, sent to heaven, and there met a girl who'd said that Mica's life was fictitious.

And then, Mica had been sent back in time, back to before her parents had gone rogue, before she and her brother had been separated, and long before she and Tim had ever gotten engaged.

And, most importantly, before she'd been revealed as a vampire spy to the human populace.

Many words could have been used to describe Mica's second run at life, but she herself would have gone with 'hilarious.'

Though that didn't diminish her worry that something would kill her and start the whole cycle over again. Sisyphus, she was not. Or, at least, she didn't want to be.

And so, when she'd awoken one day in a strange place, only to be told that she'd been enrolled in a school, well, Mica had decided to be cautiously optimistic.

Of course, she'd kept her appearance locked down; she wasn't insane.

But still, this was something new.

And, yet, somehow also familiar.

"Welcome," said a predatory alien standing onstage, to the clustered group of several dozen confused youths that constituted his audience.

"My name is General Martok," he continued. "I realize that most of you have your hands full facing the trials of Jak'tahla, or, in unfortunate cases, with trying to escape Stovokor. But, rest assured, I am no Kos'karii. This is very much real."

"What…" began a fey-looking girl. "What do you want from us?" Her lower lip trembled.

"You are, all of you, practitioners of an ancient earth craft known as 'Fan Fiction.'"

There was a collective intake of breath.

"Your works contain too many typography errors; thus, you have been brought here to learn the ancient Klingon art of Copy Editing."

They blinked at him.

He couldn't be serious.

"I wish you the best of luck in your studies here," Martok finished, crossing his arms in one final salute. "Qapla!"

"Qapla," returned a smattering of the students, though they sounded uncertain more than anything.
A few of them had been surprised into responding. A human had been startled into crossing her arms as she returned the farewell, Mica noted. Next to the human, an alien seemed to have reflexively crossed her arms into some salute native to another empire altogether.

No one clapped.

But taking another look at the human/alien pair, Mica found herself moving over to start a conversation with them, since she was fairly certain that the human was a body-snatcher, and that said body-snatcher had been one of the five people she'd met in heaven.

As it turned out, that human hadn't been Sai, merely an alternate-universe doppelganger. Several times removed.

A month later, Clara Hart and Cultivar Muscovite had been gone, anyway, along with three others, so it hadn't mattered much, in the long run.

And, Mica wasn't stupid, she'd read Sue-niversity fics before, and dismissed them as mean-spirited. There was obviously more going on here than met the eye. Especially since people would 'graduate' fairly regularly, never to be seen again.

And so, Mica had kept her guard up, and used all her infiltrator training to figure out what was truly motivating their captors.

Well, almost all of her skills. Mica hadn't seen any point in accumulating social capital, so she'd styled herself as an iconoclast, spending most of her time with those left behind by the formation of cliques, big-sister instincts kicking into high gear at the double-threat of their gilded cage of a school, and the sharp memories of how painful loneliness in such a place could be.

Though the blatant manipulations some of her classmates had been attempting on Mica and on each other certainly weren't helping.

She got that there would inevitably be some amount of preconception involved in meeting people previously only known as fiction, but, really, this was getting ridiculous. Did they think they were being subtle, when they stared at her blood red pendant with sympathetic eyes? Did they think she would find it encouraging when they told her to 'just hang in there a little while longer'?

All they were doing was making her feel uncomfortable at their blatant pandering.

Less than two months later, they got a few transfer students. At first, she'd just thought it had been Clara and Muscovite getting dragged back.

When 'Muscovite' had spotted Mica and waved enthusiastically, however, Mica had revised her expectations a few times. Clara had the body she'd recognized, but the person she'd met had been the body-snatcher, 'Sai,' she remembered.

With the two of them was a third woman, who seemed like some kind of halfling? She looked something like a smaller version of Sai, at least.

"Well, this is highly irregular," said Q, their history teacher.

"Ah, these are transfer Students," explained Malthazar, their math teacher.

"Not repeat offenders?" asked Q, eyeing them, suspiciously.
"No," said Malthazar. "They are not of our reality, per se, but rather from the mirror universe."

"Well then, welcome!" He beamed. "I am Q."

He snapped his fingers, and a woman appeared.

"This is my wife, Q…"

Snap. A teenager appeared.

"…my son, Q…"

Snap. A middle-aged man appeared.

"…and this here is Q, an old friend of the family."

He snapped his fingers one last time and they all vanished. "And yourselves?"

"Saino Moore," said Sai.

"Ash Hughes," said Ash.

"Celadon," said the third.

"Charmed, I'm sure," said Q, before waving a hand, dismissively. "Fight over the open seats yourselves, then fill out these papers and hand them in."

He snapped his fingers and each of them held a stack of forms, presumably the same quiz the rest of them had filled out upon arrival.

The newcomers acquiesced and moved apart to find seats.

They sat down and began writing, while Q continued on with his lecture.

The instant one of them finished marking their papers, the packet vanished.

First Celadon's.

Then Sai's.

Then Ash's.

"Let's see what archetypes we have…" began Q, before reclaiming and perusing the tests. "Agony Sue, Broken Sue, and Possession Sue," he read off, before frowning.

"Were you honest on the tests?" he asked.

"Yes," lied Celadon.

"Technically everything I said was true," hedged Sai.

Ash shrugged. "It doesn't count as lying, if it's a survey."

"Because, if I look at your records," Q went on, "it looks like you've been assigned archetypes, already. 'Breaker Sue' for you," he said to Ash. "'Bullet Sue' for you," he said to Sai. He frowned at the paper. "And all yours says is 'Fusion,'" he said to Celadon. "Care to explain?"
"Certainly," she said. "I am a fusion of Ash Hughes and Saino Moore."

She paused, dredging up old memories. "I've been told that I'm the cross product of my components' 'vectors' in six spatial dimensions."

Q put a hand to his chin in consideration. "Now that I look for it, it's obvious."

For all that Mica's treatment had bothered her, that was nothing compared to her indignation at the treatment of everyone else, especially the three new kids.

She'd come into school mid-year before, and she'd always found it immensely frustrating whenever teachers acted like weeks worth of material could be caught up on in a single week. Either it implied that the information was much less condensed than necessary, or the teachers did not value the education of the new students. She figured it was some combination of the two.

Though her life experiences had certainly not left her predisposed to trust authority. This whole thing was giving her flashbacks to the empire's training methods, which involved putting no pressure on the students mid-curriculum, before slaughtering those who failed to pass the final exam.

She couldn't let that happen, not again. If that meant she had to badger everyone else into studying, if that meant that she had to take these three newbies by the hand and recap all the previous lessons in excruciating detail… then so be it.

It wasn't as though they were jerks. If anything, the three of them seemed… almost afraid of her? Ash rarely met her eyes. Sai's priorities seemed to be skewed to such an extent that they existed on an orthogonal plane to normality.

In other words, a typical fangirl.

Celadon had eyes and ears only for her two components. She seemed oddly protective over the two of them. Which, considering the fact that if one of them was killed, she could very well cease to exist, Mica could kind of get.

Ash was apparently her 'author' and Mica wasn't sure what she'd expected from such a person, but it certainly hadn't been this. She would have expected a chess master, or a dramatic artiste, not this withdrawn, focused individual who spent most of her time reading textbooks and going over Mica's proffered notes.

Though, Mica supposed it made some amount of sense. More than an author, Ash was a writer. Writers were usually thinkers more than doers. And Mica was Ash's protagonist. It made sense that she'd have given Mica traits that she wished she'd possessed herself. Such as social skills, charisma, and talent. All of this made sense, intellectually, it was just. Hard. To wrap her head around.

"What did they mean when they said we had 'archetypes'?' asked Sai, in one of their numerous study sessions.

Ash paused in her reading, obviously interested to hear the answer as well, though she remained silent. In fact, she never spoke to Mica unless spoken to, apparently waiting for Mica to make the first move, something that Mica had no intention of doing. She didn't mind tutoring people, she found it calming, in fact, but a serious conversation with her quote-unquote 'creator' wasn't something she felt up for, at the moment.

Celadon had yet to crack open a book in Mica's presence, but she had also rarely failed to answer a question correctly, so Mica figured whatever cheat she had was fairly reliable.
"All characters can be said to have an archetype," Mica answered. "Since we're here, that archetype is 'Mary Sue.' Normally, that would be sufficient, but since there are so many of us, further distinctions must be made."

"Like when you've watched so much shonen anime that you have to start coming up with sub-categories," offered Sai.

"I suppose," said Mica, who wasn't about to admit to watching anime, if she could help it.

"I was told that I am a 'Parasitic Sue,' and—seeing as my nature is to be a quite literal bloodsucker—this accounts for things on the surface level. Going deeper, though, I have noticed that I define myself in large part by other people's opinions of me, how they react to my actions, and so on."

"Possession Sue, I'm familiar with," said Celadon. "As well as Peggy Sue, Marty Stu, and God Mode Sue. But what were the ones they saddled us with?"

"Well, your two halves initially tested as Agony Sue and Broken Sue," said Mica. "An Agony Sue is one who agonizes over her knowledge of the future and her decision to keep said knowledge to herself. A Broken Sue hits most of the same notes as a Broken Bird. She gains power through pathos.

"They were then assigned polar opposite archetypes," Mica continued. "A Breaker Sue is one who destroys canon as she knows it simply because she can. A Bullet Sue is one who immediately bites the bullet and informs everyone that they are living in a story, simply because she can't be bothered to keep secrets."

The three of her students exchanged meaningful looks, but declined to comment further.

Professors Demona and Xanatos were passing through the library on their rounds, so Mica herself shut up for a few minutes as well, until they were gone.

Once the four of them were alone once again, Mica sighed. "I don't suppose you three have any leads on what the true motives of our captors might be?"

Celadon hummed in thought. "I wouldn't be so quick to rule out benevolence, if I were you."

Mica blinked. "What?"

"You know anything about Vulcan in this universe?" asked Celadon.

Mica was guarded, "Can't say that I do."

"Way back when," began Celadon, "there were only humanoids on Vulcan. They were a wild people, ruled by their emotions and instincts. Then, came the invasion."

She turned over a Padd, which was playing a movie clip.

"The invaders were insectoid, nearly indestructible, and insatiable. They were parasitoids, incubating their young in the chest cavities of other living beings, causing the host's death upon emergence. The war of mutual extermination continued for generations until a Vulcan named Surak noticed that one of the insectoid Queens seemed more rational than others of her kind. A tentative alliance formed between the two of them. When the Queen laid the egg of her successor, Surak took it upon himself to host it, in the hopes of making the next generation more like himself. This act of self-sacrifice led to the old Vulcan Proverb, 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Or the one.'"
"...and it worked?" guessed Mica.

"It worked," agreed Celadon. "It was centuries before they discovered the genetics to explain it, but the Xenomorphs fertilize their eggs using DNA from their hosts. This made them physiologically more like the Vulcans. The philosophies and teachings of Surak unified the two peoples to such an extent that today they consider themselves as two subspecies of Vulcans, rather than as indigenous or invaders. Today, hosting is considered a great honor, because it is seen as following in the footsteps of Surak. And the Vulcans are far from an abnormality in this universe," Celadon went on, switching tabs to show another video.

"The Medusans wear holographic appearance generators in public," Celadon continued, "to protect the sanity of other species. The Betazoids eschew certain forms of telepathy to avoid flaying the minds of the less psychically inclined. The Klingons abide by a strict code of etiquette and behavior, to ritualize the violence demanded by their traditions. Despite what one might think at first glance, this universe is defined not by monstrosity, but by mindfulness."

"Even if that's true," said Mica, "why collect Sues? It doesn't make sense."

"No," agreed Sai, "It doesn't. But that's because Fanfiction Universities don't make sense in the first place. After all, the whole point of fanfiction is that there are no barriers to entry.

"People have differing levels of education and proficiency in any given language," Celadon pointed out, "so fixating on grammar of all things is certainly elitist."

Sai waved a hand. "Not to mention that shipping outside the original author's intentions is often used to increase the amount of queer representation, so advocating against it is at least a little homophobic."

"And then there's the people who write fanfic in lieu of therapy," said Celadon, with a sigh. "Censorship is not good. If only victims of trauma are allowed to write fiction exploring trauma, then that creates a culture where everyone must put their trauma on display or else face censure and scorn."

"And really, when it comes right down to it, writing is allowed to be fun," said Sai. "Sure, a revenge fic or false accusation fic may not ever win a Pulitzer. But it doesn't need to. That's not what it's for."

"What is it for, then?" Mica wanted to know.

Sai shrugged. "Well, if you want it in one word: catharsis. The purging of negative feelings through art."

"Regardless of their motives," said Celadon, "they rescued us when we were stranded and alone, and we trust them."

"Do you?" asked Mica, turning to Ash who, characteristically, hadn't said a word in Mica's presence.

"Yes," said Ash. "But I can see why you might not want to. As C.S. Lewis wrote, 'If it's evil that troubles us, we can call upon good to save us. But if it's good that frightens us, then there's nowhere left to turn.'"

Even when she spoke, she avoided using her own words, Mica noted.

She'd reserve judgment for now.

They spent the rest of the session in silence.
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